

# Invitation to Islam

By

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*Read not to contradict and confute,  
not to believe and take for granted,  
not to find talk and discourse,  
but to weigh and consider.*

*Sir Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626)*



## FOREWORD

More than a billion persons in the world follow the Islamic faith. Although it was founded some six centuries after Christianity, it is estimated that by the close of the twenty-first century, the Muslims will surpass the total number of Christians in the world. Islam is now a dominant faith in the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asian republics, Indonesia, many African countries, and the Balkan states of Europe. However, despite its large number of adherents and extensive geographic distribution, the religion of Islam remains poorly understood in the Western hemisphere. The main purpose of writing this invitation is to make the reader aware of the true face of this religion that, unfortunately, has remained hidden from the West for a variety of reasons and for a considerable period of time.

There are many excellent books written on Islam that treat the subject in varying degrees of detail. These books are written for beginning students as well as advanced scholars, for believers as well as outside investigators. The objective of the present work is to kindle enough interest in the mind of the reader to follow up on a personal investigation of this faith. In the words of Adlai Stevenson II, "If we value the pursuit of knowledge, we must be free to follow wherever that search may lead us." Much of the material covered in this book is of general nature—covering not only Islam but also the subject of religion itself—and serves more as a broad overview rather than focussing on minute details and specifics.

This is an invitation to study the religion of Islam and offers an opportunity for the reader to pass an informed verdict on this creed. Islam is increasingly becoming the focus of religious, political and social discussions in the world, particularly in the academic and intellectual circles. The reader is sure to benefit from this brief introduction to the religion that is rapidly spreading its influence beyond its traditional home turf and is slowly gaining popularity in the Western hemisphere.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all those who reviewed this manuscript and offered numerous ideas, suggestions and corrections to make it better and more presentable.

Any errors or omissions that still remain are the sole responsibility of the author.

(Pir) Waheed Ahmad  
Mississauga, Canada  
August 24, 2010



## ISLAM — BASIC FACTS

- Founded by the Prophet Muhammad in 610 CE, in Arabia
- The word “Islam” is derived from the Arabic root that means “peace” and “submission”
- A follower is called Muslim (“one who submits”) and not Mohammedan
- The holy book or the Scriptures of Islam is called the Quran
- There are over one billion Muslims in the world today, largely in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and the Balkan states of Europe
- The two fundamental principles of Islam are: worship of God, and kindness unto people
- Important articles of faith in Islam include belief in: God, His Angels, the Prophets, the Revealed Books, the Day of Judgement, and God’s decree
- Important worships in Islam include: Declaration of faith, five Daily Prayers, keeping of fasts for one month, giving of *zaka* or prescribed alms, and Pilgrimage to the *Ka’ba* in Mecca
- Islam accepts the bona fide status of all major religions of the world, their founders, their prophets and their Scriptures
- Islam claims to be the final stage of evolution and culmination of the religious tradition of mankind
- The position of God is central to Islam. It recognises no intermediaries between man and God and all beseeching and prayer are directed only to God.
- Islam has a complete system of regulations pertaining to various social institutions such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, penal codes, and dietary prohibitions
- Islam has a strong ethical and moral foundation enjoining virtue and prohibiting evil
- Social vices—such as drinking, narcotics, gambling, usury, and extra-marital and same-sex relations—are prohibited in Islam
- Islam respects all human rights with respect to both men and women
- Islam is in complete conformity with human nature and the natural sciences

- Islam has no priesthood. There are no religious services in Islam that cannot be carried out by a layperson.
- Islam ushered in a long period of civilisation and secular enlightenment in the Middle East, Central Asia and Spain that lasted well into the fourteenth century. Much of the impetus for European Renaissance actually came from knowledge gained by Europe from the Muslims.
- After a long period of spiritual decline, a revival of faith is presently underway in the Islamic world led by the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam as was prophesied in all the major religions of the world.

## INTRODUCTION

Many a sage has remarked that different religions are merely different roads that all converge upon the same Reality. It is quite true that despite their apparent differences, all religions aim to provide a basic framework for man's social, moral, intellectual and spiritual development. This development is part of an evolutionary process in which all the prophets have played a key role in reviving man's lost contact with God. As we distance from the advent of a prophet, spiritual and moral deterioration sets in, and the need for a new prophet becomes evident. The present age is also passing through that evolutionary process which calls for a reformer to establish the lost contact with God.

Unfortunately, the last three centuries have witnessed a steady decline in our esteem and respect for religion in general. Newly armed with the tools of empirical investigation and rational thinking, we began to look down upon anything that could not be analysed in the laboratory or described with a neat mathematical equation. Due to our naiveté, we took religion and science to be two competing fields and, in our haste, rejected the former.

However, our religions have a great deal to offer—as is detailed in the following pages. Despite their obvious diversity, they display a remarkable unity in purpose and great conformity in essence. When explored minutely, they all intend to be working towards the general betterment of humanity.

We human beings have been gifted with two important traits: a mind that can work out the physical intricacies of this universe and a soul that can perceive the subtle vibrations of a Higher Presence. While we hone our scientific skills to make further discoveries in the universe, let us not deprive the need of our soul to reach out and touch—so to speak—the very Source of this universe.

Islam is at once the newest as well as the oldest religion on earth. Appearing in the early seventh century of the Christian Era, Islam is the youngest of the major religions of the world. Yet, by its very name and teachings, Islam is also the continuation of the religious traditions that date back to the Prophet Adam.

No religion should be looked at in isolation from other major religions of the world anymore than one brick can be looked at in isolation from other bricks in a grand edifice. To do so is to commit great injustice to both—the individual religion, as well as the overall religious tradition of mankind. For this reason, Islam should not be viewed as a separate competing ideology but rather a state of evolution of the other faiths. Islam is simply the natural growth of mankind's religious traditions that continually require ever more logical and rational perspectives in line with general secular advancements.

Islam holds the same relationship to the field of religion that Theory of Everything<sup>1</sup> holds to the field of science. They are both designed to explain the sum of all phenomena pertaining to their particular realms—scientific, in the case of Theory of Everything, and religious in the case of Islam. Just as Theory of Everything attempts to bind all the forces of Nature into a single entity, so does Islam claim to bind all the various religious traditions and philosophies of mankind into a single ideology. It is for this reason that the roots of Islam are said to lay within the teachings of other major faiths of the world. It is also for this reason that Islam supports the authenticity of all bona fide religious teachings and the credibility of all bona fide religious Founders and Scriptures.

Islam is a faith and a proper study of Islam requires that we know something about the reality of religion itself. A brief prelude therefore is added that explains the fundamental characteristics of religions in general. In the study of religions, those aspects are considered fundamental that are not only common to all major faiths of the world but are also absolutely necessary for an ideology to be classified as such. The reader should find this general discussion on religion quite interesting and may wish to re-look at his or her own faith in the light of these fundamentals.

The discourse on Islam consists of a general introduction to the beliefs, worships and important aspects of this faith. It is designed to present this faith in a systematic manner, clearly explaining its fundamental principles and its overall philosophy.

The presentation on Islam is followed by a short outline of the life of its founder. Having appeared rather recently in the history of world religions, the life of the Prophet Muhammad<sup>saw</sup> (570-632 CE)

is reasonably well documented and preserved by Muslims and scholars of other faiths have also written about him.

The spread of Islam in the Middle East and Spain ushered in an age of spiritual enlightenment and secular learning the like of which has not been seen before. Thus, a chapter is dedicated to enumerating the contributions of medieval Muslims to the fields of natural sciences, medicine, mathematics and philosophy.

Despite the very large number of its adherents, Islam remains one of the most misunderstood religions in the world—particularly in the Western hemisphere. This has led to a very poor appreciation of this faith and persistent and unnecessary attacks on the character of its founder. Thus, a brief chapter notes this point and presents some impartial viewpoints by European scholars.

After centuries of secular and spiritual stagnation, Islam is emerging as a practical and vibrant modern-day ideology. This theme is briefly dealt under Renaissance of Islam.

As political boundaries are gradually weakening, mankind is increasingly becoming grouped along lines of common language, heritage and civilisation. There is widespread perception that a highly divided world presents a fundamentally unstable situation that may lead to major clashes in the future. A case is therefore made for the world to adopt a common ideology.

If the reader is not already well versed in the fundamentals of Islam, this brief discourse on the subject of religion in general and Islam in particular is bound to come as a very pleasant surprise. Islam is a truly beautiful and fulfilling ideology if looked at with impartial eyes. Thus, an open mind and an unbiased attitude shall help the reader in deriving maximum benefit from this presentation.

## **WHAT IS RELIGION?**

Majority of the world's population belongs to ten major religions that originated in three great centres of religious traditions: India, the birthplace of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism; China and Japan that gave birth to Taoism, Confucianism and Shinto; and the Near East, the cradle of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These great religions of the world are responsible for all our accumulated wealth of wisdom, philosophy, ethics, and social attitudes. In addition, they have influenced the culture, language and moral attitudes of almost every person living today.

Traditionally, religions are defined as having those sets of beliefs, ideologies and practices that are held or carried out in a theistic framework in which God plays a central role. All religions are considered to be of Divine origin where important aspects of the faith have been communicated by God to man through the agency of revelation and inspiration. Many religions of the world clearly fit this description. These include Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Some other ideologies—such as Confucianism and Taoism—have been traditionally viewed by scholars only as wisdom and philosophy, without including them in the sphere of religion. However, modern research has shown that there is enough evidence in the case of both Confucian and Taoist teachings to be considered of revelatory origin. The present lack of emphasis on the person of God in these teachings is simply due to changes that have taken place over the past twenty-five centuries. The study of ancient religions is very much like the study of archaeological findings where a researcher is forced to visualise the original condition of the artefact before the ravages of time took their toll.

### **The Common Ground**

Even a cursory study of the major religions of the world would highlight the great diversity that exists in their beliefs and practices. If we add to this the additional variation that is evident in the

multitude of sects and denominations, we obtain a dazzling kaleidoscope of moral, social and spiritual perspectives that are now prevalent in the world. Yet, a deeper examination of these religious and denominational viewpoints reveals that there is a lot more that is common among them than is generally accepted by people. Most differences are superficial and fundamentally inconsequential. It is to this common ground that we now turn to.

Despite the great variety of world's religions and the apparent disparity in their beliefs and practices, three fundamental aspects are shared by all faiths. These include:

- Belief in God or the Supreme Being, as the originator and governor of the entire universe,
- Belief in the fact that important aspects of religion are communicated to man through Divine revelation or inspiration, and
- Belief in the fact that man should mould his life according to these Divine dictates.

These, then, are the three most basic and fundamental aspects on which the foundations of every single one of the world's great religions are based. Despite many obvious differences among the various creeds, the above premises are common to all religions. As well, in the absence of any one of these premises, an ideology cannot be classified as a religion.

Let us now examine these three fundamental religious precepts in some detail.

### **Belief in God**

In some form or another, every religiously inclined person believes in the existence of God. Very simply stated, God is that Supreme Being above Whom none other exists with like powers and attributes. Entirely for linguistic reasons, different peoples of the world have used different words for the Supreme Being. Thus, He is called Brahman in Sanskrit, Ahura Mazda in the Avesta language of

the Zoroastrians, Yazdan and Khuda in Persian, Yahweh and Elohim in Hebrew, El in the Aramaic language of Jesus Christ, Theos in Greek, Deus in Latin, Allah in Arabic, Dieu in French, Gott in German and, of course, God in English. It must be appreciated that these are simply different appellations for the same Ultimate Reality. Thus, Allah is not a tribal god of the Arabs—as many people mistakenly believe—but the Arabic equivalent of the English word ‘God’. It is for this reason that the word Allah is used in the Old and New Testaments when they are rendered into Arabic. In fact the word “Allah” existed among the Arabs long before the appearance of Islam.

Since God is not a material object and we cannot see Him through our mortal eyes, His existence has been constantly questioned and debated throughout recorded history. Over the ages, many people have tried to prove that God exists and many others have countered with arguments that such a person either does not exist or we are totally incapable of determining His existence. These arguments—both in favour and against the existence of God—have ranged from the very naïve and simplistic to the most esoteric and convoluted. The net result of this entire debate in history has been that no mathematical or physically irrefutable proof has emerged on which everyone could agree. The British theologian, David Jenkins<sup>2</sup>, sums up this situation very neatly when he says that:

“No statement about God is simply, literally true. God is far more than can be measured, described, defined in ordinary language, or pinned down to any particular happening.”

In fact, considering the very concept of God, it is rather naïve of us to expect that some irrefutable physical proof of God’s existence should have been found over the centuries and millennia that the religions have existed. God is neither an object nor physical in His nature. Even the word Spirit does injustice to His person since it, too, carries some connotations of being bound by space and time.

The increasing emphasis on rationalism and empiricism over the past three centuries has made it all the more difficult to come up with incontrovertible proofs for the existence of God. Many proofs that have been used historically for the existence of God have now



been demonstrated to be either suffering from fallacies or are incomplete in some other respect. Again, it was unrealistic on our part to suppose that conventional logic would have supplied the necessary proofs about someone Who defies all physical and material constraints.

Historically, the proofs for the existence of God have ranged from the physical to the emotional. In the physical category fall the proofs that the very existence and orderliness of this universe demonstrate the presence of a Creator or God. In the emotional category is included the supposition that God is in fact too subtle to be perceived physically and can only be felt by the delicate sensitivity of the human heart.

It would not be surprising that being the Most Subtle Himself, it takes the subtlest of human instruments to detect God. A rational analysis leading to the existence of God may show Him only as an impersonal Creator of this universe. By contrast, the God perceived by the human heart emerges as a friendly, caring, forgiving, merciful and loving Person. Blaise Pascal<sup>3</sup>, the well-known 17<sup>th</sup> century French scientist and philosopher, expresses this viewpoint in the following words:

“God is never found through reason but only perceived by the heart.”

The proper concept of God is beautifully summed up by Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of India in his book *Haqiqatul Wahi*, in the following words:

“The being of God is hidden upon hidden and beyond of beyond and is most secret and cannot be discovered by the power of human reasoning alone, and no argument can prove it conclusively; inasmuch as reason can travel only so far that contemplating the universe it feels the need of a Creator. But the feeling of a need is one thing and it is quite another to arrive at the certainty that the God Whose need has been felt does in fact exist. As the operation of reason is defective, incomplete and doubtful, a philosopher cannot recognize God purely through reason.”<sup>4</sup>

## Belief in Divine Communication

After belief in God, the second fundamental aspect of all religions is that God communicates with human beings. The mechanism of communication has been variously described as revelation, inspiration, dreams and visions. The ones who experience this converse with God are called *nabi*<sup>5</sup>, prophets, messengers, apostles, enlightened ones, avatars<sup>6</sup>, rishis<sup>7</sup> and saints.

The existence of revelation, inspiration, dreams and visions can be seen in every creed and religion in the world. Thus, the essential truths of all religions can be traced to the mechanism of Divine communication. In fact the actual process of revelation and inspiration is very widespread in the world and can be seen in the secular sphere as well. Many discoveries and solutions to many complex problems have been attributed in history to these phenomena.

Although the existence of revelation is widely accepted by people, its actual mechanism remains shrouded in mystery. It is still debated whether revelation is a direct communication proceeding from God or whether it is the perception of ultimate truth by our finely tuned hearts and souls. In any case, the sudden and extremely creative acts of inspiration are present in almost every endeavour of human beings. Such processes have led to inventions, discoveries, medical treatments, literary and poetic works, and solutions to knotty problems in mathematics and physical sciences.

Closely linked with the concept of Divine revelation is the idea of divinely appointed or inspired persons. In the Near Eastern faiths, such persons have been called *nabi* or prophets. The Hebrew and Arabic word *nabi* means one who is called, or who announces, or who calls others unto God. These “callers unto God” are also regarded as emissaries of God in the sense that they act as message-bearers for the Divine communication between God and man. In the Indian faiths, such persons are identified as rishis and avatars. Rishis are the saints and sages who impart wisdom to the people and avatars are considered the metaphoric manifestations of God Himself.

Whatever religion we study, we find the presence of such persons who spread love and wisdom among their people, exhort

them to be good and righteous, and admonish them to shun evil and ignorance. They implement social reforms, establish justice, and foster peaceful and harmonious living. Their own character is always above reproach and a worthy example for others to follow. Their teachings can be radical in the sense that they present new perspectives to the people and denounce superstition and false belief. They set an unusual example of humbleness, charity, patience, perseverance, bravery, forgiveness and unconditional love for humanity. They were truly great men in their own times and continue to stand as towering personalities in the annals of history.

Unfortunately, history of mankind has not kept a complete record of how many prophets or messengers of God have actually come to the world and what exactly did they accomplish. Many religions have come and gone, and historical records of many surviving religions are incomplete. At the same time, there is considerable debate among the religious scholars themselves as to who is a prophet and who is merely a saint or a wise man. Again, modern research into the lives of many so called wise men and philosophers is turning up evidence that these people received revelation and believed in and advocated the existence of God among their followers.

The modern study of comparative religions is helping a great deal in recognising common elements that exist among the various religions. By far the most common element in all religions is the presence of these great religious Reformers and Teachers. As stated earlier, these persons are known by various titles in various countries. In the land of India, we recognise them as Rama and Krishna in Hinduism; as Mahavira in Jainism; and as Gautama Sidharta Buddha in the Buddhist traditions.

In the land of China, the prophets have been looked at as wise men and philosophers. The two most well known of these are of course Lao-tzu (604-524 BC) and Confucius (551-479 BC). However, modern scholarship has recognised many other personalities in China that appear to fit the traditional role of a prophet. These include Fu Hsi (ca. 3320 BC), Yu (ca. 2140 BC), King Wan (ca. 1140 BC), and Mencius (d. 290 BC). There is sufficient evidence to suggest that these persons not only believed in God but also preached their message to the people.

Undoubtedly, the widest recognition of prophecy and prophets exists in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic religious tradition of the Near East. The function and role of prophets is very clearly defined in these three faiths and a great number of such persons are identified by name. Thus all three faiths recognise the prophet-hood of Adam, Enoch, Noah, Lot, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Samuel, Gad, Nathan, David, Solomon, Elijah, Micaiah, Obadiah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Job, Zechariah, Ezra and Malachi. While the Jews stopped recognising as prophet anyone after Malachi, the Christians and Muslims continue this tradition in the persons of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Again, while the Christians stopped recognising anyone as prophet after Jesus Christ, Muslims continue this tradition in the person of Muhammad.

The prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra in Greek) can also be included among the list of prophets that appeared in the Near East. Although technically born in the steppes east of the Caspian Sea, his religion and philosophy have left indelible marks on the teachings of subsequent prophets that appeared in the general area.

The recognition of prophets outside these three major religious centres—India, China and the Near East—is woefully lacking. A great deal of research is required to study the history of other nations and lands and to discern the role that certain men may have played as prophets and reformers. One such person that has recently been recognised in this role is Socrates<sup>8</sup>. Although little is known of this Greek philosopher other than what has been recorded in the dialogues of Plato<sup>9</sup> and the writings of Xenophon<sup>10</sup>, modern scholarship has started to view his role more and more as that of a prophet. It appears that his preaching of One God was in fact the basis for the charge against him that he was corrupting the minds of the Athenian youth. It was likely for this crime that he was sentenced to drink poison.

Unfortunately, mutual hostilities among tribes, nations and peoples have tended to disregard the valid status of many prophets and religions. Thus, many ethnic communities recognise such persons only among their own forefathers and doubt the existence of similar persons in rival communities. Although such an emotion is very natural, it has tended to impede the spiritual growth of

mankind. It is indeed very strange that we tend to accept the contributions of scientists, philosophers, writers and poets without looking either at the colour of their skin or their national association. However, when it comes to the recognition of truly wise men in the form of prophets, we put up very tight walls and protective fences around our own heritage. Thus, we tend not to benefit from the works and wisdom of many other luminaries who appeared in other lands and religions of the world. This is truly sad and a great tragedy for mankind.

It is true that rival philosophies and ideologies in the past have led to physical confrontation and loss of life, land and possessions for many peoples. However, the increasingly peaceful climate and harmonious co-existence that exist today, allow us to fully benefit from the totality of mankind's legacy and intellectual heritage. The beautiful teachings and wisdom of the great Teachers are not the sole possession of any one community. Many of these teachings cross all barriers of colour and ethnic affiliation and truly belong to the collective heritage of mankind. We shall be a lot wiser if we benefited from the teachings and philosophies of all wise men even if they appear to belong to rival faiths and religions.

One of the saddest occurrences in religious history has been the fact that followers of many religions ended up deifying their prophets, wise men and avatars. This immortalisation of the great Teachers has been carried out to varying degrees by practically every religion of the world. In some traditions, these Teachers are considered super-beings, although still human in nature. In others, they have been literally turned into semi-gods, deities and objects of worship. Much of this has taken place because of the natural human tendency to believe in super-heroes and super-beings. An obvious side benefit of exaggerating the actions and achievements of these persons was to attract new converts to the Faith.

The widespread recognition of prophecy and prophets in the world is a modern discovery and is based on comparative study of religions. Unfortunately, all comparative studies of religions quickly break down into a competitive study in which one tries to paint the beauties of one's own religion to the discredit of all others. This is neither right nor educational. In reality, all religions of the world

came from the same Source and with the same objective of guiding humanity.

## **Belief in the Purpose of Human life**

The third fundamental aspect of all religions is the recognition of a purpose in one's life. In the theistic framework, one's life is to be patterned in a particular way that is dictated by God. Thus, the beliefs and practices of a religious person are expressed in such a way that they reflect a Divine plan and scheme of things.

Our life is truly the greatest gift given to us. Having a free will, we are at liberty to mould this life along any pattern that we may wish. However, in the religious framework, this life should be led and moulded in such a way that it reflects the will and purpose of God. We are advised of the will of God through our religious teachings. Unfortunately, there is such great diversity in beliefs and religious practices among the peoples that it is truly difficult to determine as to what exactly is the will of God with respect to every human being on the face of earth.

The study of comparative religions—developed largely over the past century or so—indicates that there are only two essential ingredients towards leading a purposeful and meaningful life. These two ingredients are common to every religion and creed of the world. Very simply stated, they relate to man's two relationships:

- Man's relationship with God, and
- Man's relationship with fellow man

Amazingly, every other belief, notion, practice or supposition is included in the above two fundamental principles. Obviously, both are very vast in their philosophy and scope, and many books can be written to describe each. Yet, in two short phrases, they do sum up the entire purpose of human existence and thus enable us to focus our lives in the right direction.

Many debates have taken place in history as to which one of the above two principles is the more important. In reality, a full and wholesome life demands that both obligations be discharged with all honesty and sincerity. All emphasis on service to humanity with no remembrance of God leaves our lives empty on the inside. We fail to find true insights in the vast creation of God or in the grand scheme that appears to be operating towards a certain direction. Similarly,

with all emphasis on God's worship and little thought of service to humanity makes us selfish and arrogant. In the final analysis, what good is dry piety if it does not help our fellow beings? Thus, a balanced human life requires a happy combination of the above two requirements. This is the essential philosophy of all religions.

While it is indeed very simple to state the two objectives of man's life, in practice, however, it is quite difficult to figure out the details. This very point has led to the development of many religions, sects and denominations. However, despite such great diversity in religious beliefs and practices, the two simple phrases given above can be clearly seen in the background of every religion of the world. They continue to remind us of our ultimate duty and obligation that may otherwise go unnoticed in the great variety of our daily actions.

Let us further analyse as to what is really meant by our relationships with God and humanity.

### **Man's relationship with God**

Our relationship with God is summed up by our worship of the Supreme Being—the Creator and Governor of the entire universe. The word worship carries an amazing depth of meaning in English as well as in many other languages. It implies reverence, veneration, respect, devotion, adulation, admiration, adoration and love. Thus, the Supreme Being is worthy of all these emotions in us. He must be respected for His status as the sole ruler of the universe; He must be admired for His amazing creation; and He must be loved for His caring, merciful and loving treatment of His creation.

Unfortunately, much of the worship of God is carried out either out of fear for His punishment or out of greed for possible rewards. The element of love is all too often absent in most worships. It is true that the non-corporeal, non-material and non-physical nature of God makes it difficult to visualise Him and thus love Him as one loves another human being or material objects. However, it is indeed possible to reflect upon God's creation, the wisdom behind His actions, the very special care that He accords His chosen ones, and then begin to love such a Person.



In fact, lovers of God have been born in every religion and community in the world. The intensity of their love for God was as strong, or even stronger, than any love that a human being can bear for material or mortal objects. History has recorded some truly amazing tales of such love for God that make for some of the most inspiring and interesting religious reading that exists.

Unfortunately, our history is practically written with the red ink of human blood. Wars have been fought in the name of religion and people have been slaughtered and persecuted in the name of God. All too often, such atrocities are perpetrated by the very people who otherwise profess to worship God. While many worshippers of God have indeed committed heinous crimes against humanity, there has never been a single case of such atrocity perpetrated by true lovers of God. It is practically impossible to fall in love with one's Beloved and then mistreat His creatures—human or otherwise. Thus, the greatest benefactors of humanity in history have been those persons who happened to love God the most.

### **Man's relationship with fellow man**

The second aspect of human life deals with a meaningful relationship with the rest of humanity. We are social beings and tend to live as families, clans, groups and nations. Over the ages, the religions of the world have advocated very specific manner in which we must act within our societies. While an individual draws additional benefit of security and availability of resources when he joins a community, he also incurs additional responsibility to ensure that the community's welfare is not jeopardised. Thus, every religion in the world has developed certain guidelines for the behaviour of its followers so that the society in general continues to function as amicably and efficiently as possible.

Frequently, changing circumstances and social conditions severely tax the continued applicability of religious edicts. This problem is common to all religions in the world and they all deal with it in their own specific way. The greater the elasticity in the interpretation of religious edicts, greater is the likelihood that those edicts will survive the trials of time.

However, continuing secular enlightenment of mankind has led to frequent conflicts with religious beliefs and practices. Reason and rationality are playing an increasingly greater role in our daily lives. They are posing a severe challenge to many historic beliefs and traditional practices. This subject is discussed briefly in the next chapter.

## CONFLICT WITH RATIONALITY

The rise of rationalism<sup>11</sup> after the seventeenth century is the single most important factor that is responsible for the demise of spirituality and religiosity among the peoples of all faiths. This chapter deals with the important differences between reason and religion and traces the history of mutual conflict that has existed between the two. Certain solutions are also proposed here to the relative impasse that exists today.

### Reason and Rationality

Rationality is the process of reasoning and logical analysis to arrive at the truth about something. It is a very unusual human faculty in which logical thinking can solve many knotty problems and puzzles. Aristotle<sup>12</sup> was remarkably accurate when he stated that:

“Rationality is the key feature that distinguishes human beings from other animals”.

While our faculty to obtain knowledge through experience and revelation is shared by other animals, our faculty to obtain knowledge through rational analysis is unique to our species.

While rationality appears to be a very useful faculty of human beings, its embodiment in philosophy has caused considerable concern. In the philosophical theory of rationalism, exercise of reason is considered the only valid basis for acquiring knowledge. The theory maintains that both empiricism<sup>13</sup> and revelation are unnecessary in advancing our knowledge. Thus, in its extreme form, rationalism attacks the process of Divine revelation as well as knowledge gained through experience.

This extremism among the rationalists is not new and can be traced to the ancient Greek world. Early Greek philosophers such as Parmenides<sup>14</sup>, Zeno<sup>15</sup>—and to a lesser extent even Plato—represented the acme of such extreme rationalism. They

downplayed the importance of our experience and often doubted the validity of their own senses. With the solitary exception of Socrates, the Greeks also rejected the role of revelation in the acquisition of human knowledge.

### **Religion and Revelation**

Religious notions, on the other hand, are largely based on beliefs. Although rationality plays an important role in understanding Divine revelation, the followers generally accept the beliefs and religious edicts without questioning. Once the authenticity of the Teacher is established to one's satisfaction, the contents of the Teacher's message are largely accepted without further scrutiny. In the mind of the religious person, anything that is ultimately attributed to God need not be challenged or tested. Therefore, religious truths are seldom subjected to the same rigorous analysis as knowledge obtained through scientific and logical processes.

Although the Vedas<sup>16</sup>, the Torah<sup>17</sup>, the Gospel<sup>18</sup> and the Quran<sup>19</sup> are clearly of Divine origin, the processes of revelation and inspiration are far more widespread than the transmitting of religious truth alone. If one were to carry out a painstaking examination of the history of man's progress, one would find innumerable instances where secular knowledge was transmitted to man through revelation and inspiration.

The rational acquisition of knowledge occurs rather slowly where details of existing knowledge are worked out through reasoning, analysis and logical thinking—one step at a time. The revelatory process by contrast results in quantum leaps in our knowledge over very short periods. Such processes have resulted in very sudden insights in our secular knowledge as well as religious truth.

### **The Age of Belief**

For a long time, the fields of religion and scientific investigation were kept largely separate. Rational analysis was confined essentially to the visible universe while religious notions were

relegated to the field of belief, philosophy and metaphysics. During this period, religion kept an upper hand over reason, rationality and the physical sciences. This apparent peace between religion and rationality lasted until the seventeenth century of the Christian Era. In fact the long period of human existence leading up to this point is commonly referred to as the Age of Belief.

During this Age of Belief, the sciences were confined to simple observation of natural phenomena. Experimentation was uncommon, and hypotheses and theories were practically non-existent. Many fundamental questions about the universe remained beyond the reach of the scholars. The religions were quick to fill this gap. If one raised such issues as to how the worlds originated, or how life appeared, or what shall happen to us after death, it was only the religions that had any answers. In the absence of any competing theories, the accounts by the religions were accepted as true by default.

However, followers of some religions in the world made fatal mistakes when they let elements of prevalent mythology and legends enter their beliefs. At the same time, in their zeal to explain all physical phenomena, they resorted to mere speculation rather than trying to understand Divine revelation. Thus, over their long histories, many religions became mired with superstition, mythology and dogma. This self-inflicted damage has undermined the validity and respectability of the world's religions more than any other single factor. At the same time, it allowed the pendulum to swing to the side of rationalism.

### **The Rise of Rationalism**

Extreme rationalism began in Europe in the seventeenth century, led by the writings of Descartes<sup>20</sup>, Spinoza<sup>21</sup> and Leibniz<sup>22</sup>. They philosophised that the laws of Nature and the principles of cause and effect could explain everything in the world. In the eighteenth century, the works of Hume<sup>23</sup> and Holbach<sup>24</sup> advocated that there was no room for God in rationalism. The nineteenth century ushered in some of the greatest proponents of rationalism in the form of Hegel<sup>25</sup> and Feuerbach<sup>26</sup> who proposed that the very idea of God was a projection of man's own mind. Thus began the period after the

seventeenth century that is now commonly referred to as the Age of Reason.

With the Renaissance<sup>27</sup> in Europe, the sciences took a new turn. Experimentation became essential and empiricism gained widespread recognition. At the same time, emphasis was placed on hypotheses and theories to explain a wider set of phenomena rather than a single event.

Thus, observational astronomy of the Arabs was replaced by mathematical laws governing the motion of planets. The earlier focus of Al-Kimiya<sup>28</sup> was replaced by the formulation of the atomic theory. The simple observation of animal and plant life was changed to studying their genetic characteristics and classifying them into appropriate groupings.

With all these advances, Nature suddenly became more understandable and transparent to the scientist. Rain was no more the act of God but a simple precipitation of airborne moisture. Volcanic eruptions were no longer mysterious events representing the wrath of a deity but simply crustal forces pushing the lava through a weak point on the surface of the earth. Similarly, human illnesses were seen as malfunctions in the human body or caused by microbial agents, rather than the result of curses or punishment for one's sins.

Perhaps the most severe challenge to religion came through the modern theory of biological evolution. Grossly misunderstood by the religious institutions, the theory of evolution was considered to be demeaning to the high status of human beings and was immediately rejected. Although all researchers in the field now accept these evolutionary processes, the underlying concept remains under attack by some fundamentalists even today.

The rapid scientific progress during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries only helped to confirm this period as the continuing Age of Reason. The Person of God is now totally pushed back in our societies and religion is weak and besieged. People are ashamed to call themselves religious and any belief in God or religion is considered synonymous with backwardness and ignorance.

## **Reason in Conflict with Religion**

The rise of rationalism after the seventeenth century has gradually undermined the validity of the world's great religions. With each new discovery and with each new scientific advance, the concept of God as the sole Nourisher and Governor of the universe was pushed farther and farther back into the human horizon. Under the increasing influence of rationalism, the new generations of philosophers and scientists came up with new slogans. Thus:

- Karl Marx<sup>29</sup> declared that “religion was the opium of the people”,
- Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>30</sup> wrote that “God was dead”,
- Sigmund Freud<sup>31</sup> said that “religion was an obsessional neurosis of humanity”,
- Mencken<sup>32</sup> called God “a refuge of the incompetent and the miserable”, and
- E.M. Cioran<sup>33</sup> called God a “disease” of which the newer generations were considered to be cured.

The complete removal of God and morality from the teachings of modern social philosophers has turned off many people from the pursuit of religion. Today, it is simply not “fashionable” to be considered religious. The root of present-day atheism and lack of spirituality in the world lies largely in the rise of rationalism over the past three hundred years.

Social scientists began to assert that religion was rife with superstition, inconsistencies and dogma. They proposed that religion of mankind evolved like many other institutions for the sole benefit of the clergy and for controlling the masses.

Ironically, much of this hostile attack from rationalism was brought on by the religions themselves. By the onset of the eighteenth century, every religion in the world had lost its true essence and had become corrupt, intolerant and fraught with

superstition. Original teachings of the founders and prophets were forgotten and innovations and novelties had been introduced. The religious clergy was rooted in the past and refused to accept the latest discoveries in science and their possible implications.

To make matters worse, the religions of the world are fighting among themselves and are divided into myriad sects and denominations while the philosophers and the scientists remain more or less united in their own stand.

Over the centuries, mankind has suffered much from both: dogmatic beliefs in religion, as well as extreme rationalism in our secular lives. First, the superstitious beliefs of the dark ages disillusioned many people and drove them to the side of rationality. Then, extremism in rationality over the past three hundred years has driven many people towards atheism and godlessness. Therefore there is an urgent need that rational explanation of religious beliefs is provided so that spirituality can be well understood.

Reason and rationality have suddenly become the only touchstone for determining the truth of everything—be it in the material world or the spiritual sphere. We are being increasingly guided by the rational processes of our minds as opposed to the instinctive clarity of our hearts and souls. Our feelings of love for God and humanity are taking a back seat in favour of scientific facts and statistics. We are in serious danger of losing our humanity and becoming well-informed automatons. Our dealings with others are becoming less charitable and altruistic, and our attention is increasingly focused on our own well-being and interest. To use a cliché, we are rapidly giving up our spirituality and increasingly leaning towards materialism.

### **A Common Sense Approach**

In fact, if properly applied, rationality and religion have no conflict with each other. They both work side by side to arrive at the ultimate truth about things. It is when they are improperly applied—or stretched beyond their sphere of applicability—that conflict arises between the two. This occurs when extremism creeps into either one of them.



When extremism creeps into rationalism, it begins to claim as being the only valid source of human learning. At this point, rationalism starts to deny the contributions made by revelation or empiricism. Since rationalism is a human faculty, it is ultimately limited in scope—although the philosophers would never admit to this fact.

Similarly, when extremism creeps into the religious sphere, it makes it dogmatic, mythical and superstitious. It lowers our threshold for tolerance and accommodation of other ideas. This is apparent in the fundamentalist thinking in many religions today. Thus, extremism is dangerous to the well-being of humanity, whether it is associated with rationality or religion.

Unfortunately reason and religion have always had a bittersweet relationship with each other. The American historian, Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>34</sup>, sums up this relationship beautifully when he remarks that:

“Life is a battle between faith and reason in which each feeds upon the other for sustenance, yet tries to destroy it.”

The war between rationality and religion has brought untold misery to the peoples. The conflict is totally senseless and serves no constructive purpose at all. There is urgent need for common sense to prevail and a number of persons in the world are indeed working towards the goal of bridging the gap between religion and rationality. Unfortunately, the process of reconciliation requires that their proponents take an honest look at their own suppositions.

Religions of the world need to give up all superstitious beliefs, mythical ideas and be consistent with historic and scientific truth. A stop must also be put to the exploitation of the masses in the name of religion. Religions must be prepared to give up false notions of divinity and sanctity. As well, their teachings must be consistent and not self-contradictory.

In like manner, the rationalists must recognise the limits of their own reasoning and accept Divine revelation as a bona fide source of knowledge. The rationalists must accept the limitations of logical analysis and shortcomings of human reasoning.

In the 1920s, Kurt Godel<sup>35</sup> put forward an unusual idea. He demonstrated that there are certain truths that do not lend themselves to verification through conventional mathematical or logical analysis. This notion is now known as Godel's Incompleteness Theorem and clearly points to the limitations of logic.

Similarly, the Italian philosopher Nicola Abbagnano<sup>36</sup> has remarked that:

“Reason itself is fallible, and this fallibility must find a place in our logic.”

Thus, the philosophers and scientists need to make certain adjustments for the greater benefit of humanity. They need to realise that no society in history has ever performed well with the absence of spirituality and morality. They need to realise that the religion of mankind is truly a blessing and definitely not a shackle.

In the final analysis, any conflict between reason and religion is not only futile but also unnecessary. Philosophers as well as religious scholars need to recognise the fact that mankind requires both faculties to advance its knowledge. We need reason to remove the false beliefs that are spoiling the otherwise beautiful face of the world's religions. At the same time, we need religion to establish peaceful and harmonious societies and be one with our Lord and Creator. The seventeenth-century English poet, John Donne<sup>37</sup>, summed up this entire debate in two short lines when he said:

“Reason is the left hand of our soul while faith is her right;  
By these, we reach divinity.”

## **RELIGION OF ISLAM**

Islam is one of the few religions of the world that is named after a fundamental principle, and not after its founder. In the Arabic language, the word “Islam” is derived from the root that means ‘Peace’ and ‘Submission’. This is so because Islam is meant to be a religion of peace with humanity, and submission to the will of God. It is truly remarkable that this is the only religion that carries its entire philosophy in its short, two-syllable name. In fact, it can be stated quite categorically that any aspect that does not comply with the above two root meanings, is a total deviation, innovation or novelty, and does not belong to the religion of Islam.

In the philosophy of Islam, all earlier prophets and their followers were in fact ‘Muslims’—since they all submitted to the will of God at the coming of the new revelation or prophecy. This universal perception, that all religions of the world are somehow one entity, is unique to Islam.

In a more limited sense, however, Islam does represent the formalising of this faith by the Prophet Muhammad, fourteen centuries ago. Thus, with its extensive beliefs and worships, its detailed moral and social codes, and with its very rational philosophy, Islam is the religion, the creed, and the way of life of over a billion persons in the world.

The entire philosophy of Islam can be summed up in two short phrases:

To worship God, and  
To be kind unto people

These are the two fundamental principles of Islam that also sum up its entire essence. The first is the basis of man’s relationship with God while the second is the basis of man’s relationship with fellow human beings. The first represents man’s submission to the will of God and the second represents peace with humanity. In fact, if anyone ever asked the Prophet Muhammad as to why he was sent,

he would always reply: “To establish the Unity of God and to join ties of relationship”.

Islam is an extremely structured system in which all its tenets and practices are very clearly defined by the founder of Islam himself. The system operates by laying down a set of essential beliefs for the follower and then exhorts him to act in a certain manner that is designed to fulfil the individual’s ordained purpose in life. The beliefs thus form a foundation on which the individual builds his two important relationships: one with God, and the second with fellow human beings.

## **ISLAMIC BELIEFS**

Every religion carries a core of basic beliefs that support its superstructure. Islam shares all its fundamental beliefs with other major religions of the world. In fact, there is not a single important belief in Islam that does not already exist in some form in another religion. In the religion of Islam, there are six articles of faith in which a follower must believe. These include:

- Belief in One God as the sole Originator and Sustainer of the universe,
- Belief in the Angels as God’s functionaries and powers,
- Belief in the Divinely appointed Messengers who call people unto God,
- Belief in the Scriptures that represent the Word of God,
- Belief in the existence of the Day of Judgement and final reckoning,
- Belief in the fact that God’s decree forms the basis of all important happenings in this universe.

### **Belief in God**

In the religion of Islam, God is that Supreme Being that exists by Himself and is “infinite in all perfection”. In this respect, the God of Islam is no different than the God of Krishna, Zoroaster, Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David or Jesus.

In the Islamic theology, God's true nature is incomprehensible and completely beyond our reach and understanding. We cannot know as to what exactly He is and how exactly He exists. Our knowledge of God is limited to His various attributes and manifestations. In the philosophy of Islam, God's attributes fall into two categories: Immanent and Interactive.

The immanent (or inherent) attributes of God concern strictly His own Self, in isolation from anything else. These attributes describe God as Eternal, Self-Subsisting, Ever-Living, and Everlasting. These immanent attributes do not require the existence of a universe or creation. God holds such attributes even when nothing was in existence, or nothing may be in existence some day. These Immanent attributes are shared with no one else in the universe, nor is man or any one else expected to emulate them.

The interactive attributes of God—as the word implies—relate to the manner in which God deals with His creation. In this interaction between God and what He has created, He displays a number of consistent attributes. Thus, He is not only the Creator of all things, but also their Nourisher, Provider and Refuge. He deals with His creation with compassion, mercy and justice. At no time whatsoever is He unaware as to the needs of what He has created. His perception and knowledge extends as easily to the inter-atomic spaces as it does to the astronomical distances separating the galaxies. These Interactive attributes may be shared with other creatures to a limited extent and Man is definitely expected to emulate them in his own character.

In Islamic theology, the one most emphasised Immanent aspect of God is of course His oneness or unity:

“Say, He is God, the One;  
God, the Eternal.  
He begets not, nor is He begotten;  
And there is none like unto Him.” (Al-Quran, 112:2-5)

In these four short lines, one can appreciate the extremely clear, unambiguous and logically perfect statement about God in Islam. He has to be One since superlatives cannot be shared. He has to be Eternal since he needs to exist by Himself. He cannot be begotten,

nor would He beget, so that He alone remains the sole God. And of course, there is none like unto God—for He excels in all things good and beautiful.

Some more of God's attributes are described in the following words in the Quran:

“God—there is no deity but He;  
The Living, the Sustaining;  
Slumber seizes Him not, nor sleep;  
His is all that is in the heavens and the earth.  
Who is there that shall intercede with Him save by His leave?  
He knows what lies before them and what lies after them,  
And they encompass not at all of His knowledge—save as He wills.  
His Throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and their care tires Him not.  
He is the Most High, the Supreme.” (Al-Quran, 2:256)

Similarly, the Quranic Chapter, *Al-Hadeed*, describes some more attributes of God, as follows:

“All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifies God;  
He is the Mighty, the Wise.  
His is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth  
And He has power over all things.  
He is the First and the Last,  
The Manifest and the Hidden  
And He has full knowledge of all things.  
He it is Who created the heavens and the earth in six periods,  
Then He settled Himself upon the Throne.  
He knows what enters the earth and what comes out of it;  
And what descends from heaven and what goes up into it;  
And He is with you wherever you may be;  
And God sees all that you do.  
His is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth,  
And all affairs are referred to Him.  
He causes the night to pass into the day,  
And He causes the day to pass into the night;  
And He knows well all that is in the hearts.” (Al-Quran, 57:2-7)

In the context of Islamic concept of God, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of India writes:

“The God of Islam is the same God Who is visible in the mirror of the law of nature and is discernible in the book of nature. Islam has not presented a new God but has presented the same God Who is presented by the light of man’s heart, by the conscience of man, and by heaven and earth.”<sup>38</sup>

“He is the Originator of all creation and is the fountain-head of all grace. He is the Master of all recompense and everything returns to Him. He is near and yet far, and He is far and yet near. He is above all, but it cannot be said that there is someone below Him. He is more hidden than everything else but it cannot be said that there is something more manifest than Him. He is Self Existing in His Being and everything is alive through Him. He is Self Existing and everything exists through Him. He is All Sustaining and there is nothing that supports Him. There is nothing that has come into being on its own, or can live without Him on its own. He comprehends everything, but it cannot be said what is the nature of that comprehension. He is the Light of everything in heaven and earth and every light has shown forth from His Hand and is a reflection of His Being. He is the Providence of the universe. There is no soul that is not sustained by Him and exists by itself. No soul has any power which it has not obtained from Him...”<sup>39</sup>

In the Islamic philosophy, God’s actions are neither frivolous nor lack purpose and design. Islam tells us that they are driven by equity, justice and the requirements of wisdom. Having brought His creation into existence, God deals with it with compassion, mercy and care. Thus, one of the most often repeated phrases in the Holy Quran is that ‘God is Compassionate and Merciful’.

In the religion of Islam, God is ultimately responsible for all happenings and interactions in the universe. He is not only the Creator of the universe and Nourisher of all life forms, but He is also the King of kings, the Lord of lords, and the Master of all masters. Not a leaf stirs among the woods and not a photon moves among the heavens without His knowledge and implicit consent. It is to this all-pervading presence of God that the Muslim holy book, the Quran, refers to in the following words:

“Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God!” (Al-Quran, 2:116)

In the grand scheme of things, and for yet not fully understood reasons, God in His wisdom created Man. According to a saying of the Prophet Muhammad:

“God was a hidden Treasure. He created the worlds because He desired to be known.”

For every possible need of His creation, we find in God an appropriate attribute to deal with it. To fulfil our physical requirements, He is the Nourisher and the Provider. To fulfil our psychological needs, He is the Guide, the Companion, and the Friend. He is our Supporter when we are dejected, our Hope when we are defeated, and our Light when we are strayed and lost. He is our Refuge, our Home, and our Place of Return. If we deviate from His dictates, we find Him concerned, watchful and sometimes reproofing. If we repent and turn unto Him, we find Him Kind, Compassionate and Forgiving—taking us back into His open Arms.

In summary, Islam presents some of the most convincing, logical and philosophically rational concepts regarding the Supreme Being. The Islamic concept of God is extremely simple, straightforward and completely devoid of ambiguity, mythology and inconsistency.

In the teachings of Islam, no less than one hundred different attributes exist that describe various aspects of God. On an average, every verse of the Holy Quran makes some reference to God.

Although the God of Islam is an invisible Being, yet we can see His Face amidst the petals of a blooming rose. Although God in Islam is a non-corporeal Being, yet we can see His Hand behind the motions of the farthest galaxies. Although the God of Islam is not limited to any space or time, yet we can feel His presence in the confines of our own hearts.

The God presented by Islam is a very Forgiving, Merciful and Loving God. He speaks to us today just as He spoke to His Chosen People in the days of old. He is ready to take ten paces towards us if we are only willing to take but one step towards Him. He is willing to honour the bond of love even if we fall short in our obligations to



maintain this bond. His Wing of mercy and His Arm of protection is always with us—in good health as well as in adversity. Not only is He our God, but also our Friend, our Companion, and our Beloved. Fortunes in this world are made and lost; friendships in this world are made and end in parting; but a bond of love once forged with the Creator lasts forever!

The theology of Islam is strongly monotheistic and is free of animistic beliefs, legends and mythology. It presents the Supreme Being in a clear, logical, and rational manner—describing His attributes in considerable detail. The basic philosophy of all worship in Islam is to emulate the attributes of God in one's own self and to try to please Him in every possible way. Great emphasis is placed in this religion on developing a personal relationship with God—a relationship that is based on respect of God's powers and understanding of His attributes.

### **Belief in the Angels**

All Near Eastern religions believe in the concept of Angels as God's functionaries. Thus, in the religion of Islam—as in Judaism and Christianity—Angels are considered His messengers and the “powers” through which God acts. Much of God's actions are supposedly carried out through the agency of Angels. Thus, bringing of Divine communication, warnings, good news and acts of destruction that are ultimately attributed to God, are considered to have been carried out through His functionaries, the Angels. In the Islamic philosophy, the Angels have sometimes been likened to the forces of Nature and sometimes as spiritual beings. However, as to their true nature, we know very little.

### **Belief in the Prophets**

Perhaps the most unique aspect of Islam is its recognition of all bona fide religious founders and prophets in the world. Thus, a Muslim believes not only in the prophets of ancient Israel, but also in the prophetic traditions of India, China, Iran and other parts of the world. This universal truth is expressed in the Holy Quran in the following words:

“For every people there is a messenger.” (Al-Quran, 10:48)

While many prophets are mentioned by name in the Quran, Islamic belief in prophets is not limited to just these persons. Muslims, therefore, readily accept the founders of all major religions as bona fide prophets. Muslims also accept as prophets all those persons that are accepted as prophets by the adherents of their respective faiths. Thus, all persons that are regarded by the Jews as prophets are automatically accepted as such by the Muslims.

Because of its ready acceptance of all bona fide prophets, the heritage of Islam is the richest of all religions.

In Islamic philosophy, prophets are appointed by God to call people unto Him. In this capacity, they bring Good News to the righteous and Warnings to the wicked. They are the Teachers, Preachers, Reformers and Sympathisers of humanity. They possess the ability to converse with God—through the process of revelation, inspiration, visions and dreams—and convey God’s message and purpose to the people.

According to Islamic teachings, Adam was the first known prophet. Adam was not the first man, as human beings already existed. Adam did, however, mark that stage of human evolution when man could be taught the difference between right and wrong and could be held accountable for his acts.

The religious tradition of the Near East is by far the richest in the world and most of the prophets that are known to the world appeared in this area. Some of the most noteworthy among these include Zoroaster, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. The list also includes the long prophetic tradition among the Israelites that began with the patriarch Abraham and continued until Malachi.

Muslims readily recognise the prophets that appeared in other lands and in other faiths. Thus, Ram Chander and Krishna are revered by the Muslims as prophets of the Hindu tradition. Similar reverence is accorded to Sidharta Gautama Buddha as the founder of Buddhism; Confucius as the founder of Confucianism; Lao-Tzu as the founder of Taoism; and Mahavira as the founder of Jainism.

While the followers of all other religions make their own tradition totally exclusive to themselves, Islam presents itself as the

great circle of humanity where all humans hold hands in a common religious tradition of the entire world.

While all prophets are highly revered by Muslims, they are never the objects of Islamic worship. Islam forbids the deification of prophets, sages, wise men or angels. Godhood belongs only to One Supreme God in Islam and only He is worthy of worship.

### **Belief in the Revealed Books**

Because of its acceptance of all bona fide prophets, Islam also accepts the validity of all Revealed Books or Scriptures. According to Islamic teachings, all Revealed Books such as the Hebrew Bible of the Jews, the Gospels of the Christians, the Vedas of the Hindus, Zend-Avesta of the Zoroastrians, and the religious canons of the Buddhists and of other faiths were all authentic revelations that were transmitted to bona fide recipients.

However, it should be noted that considerable alteration, interpolation, revision and modification has taken place in the Scriptures of practically every religion of the world. Thus, none of the original revelations or texts may have survived the vagaries of time in their original form. It is for this reason that there are several versions of the various religious texts of the world.

Incidentally, Muslims constitute the only religious community in the world that, despite its large numbers and sectarian and denominational differences, still follows a single version of the Quran. While the translations of the Quran into other languages may differ due to different interpretations made by the various translators, the original Arabic text used by all Muslim sects and denominations is exactly the same.

### **Belief in the Day of Judgement**

An important article of faith in Islam concerns the belief in the Hereafter. The concept involves accountability of one's actions in this world, followed by spiritual rewards and spiritual pains, in the next. The attainment of spiritual rewards in the Hereafter is highly emphasised in Islam as opposed to the pleasantries and comforts of the earthly life. The ultimate "Nirvana" in Islam is when God is

completely pleased with Man's actions and Man is completely pleased with what God has in store for him.

Islamic concept of the Hereafter begins with a Day of Destruction that is followed by a Day of Resurrection in which all human beings are revived to a spiritual life. This is followed by a Day of Reckoning when all human actions are judged. This leads to the rewards of Heaven and the retribution of Hell. The imagery of Heaven and Hell painted in the Quran is largely based on metaphoric language since no human eye has seen the reality and has come back to describe it.

### **Belief in God's Decree**

Islam clearly advocates human free will although it recognises its limits vis-à-vis God's ultimate decree. While human beings have considerable freedom to act rightly or wrongly, their actions cannot interfere with the broad plan that God has in store for the universe. The wisdom of Man's actions, therefore, lies in aligning them to the will and purpose of God.

In the Islamic teachings, human free will extends to a very large part of one's life and one's area of influence. In this sphere, one is completely free to do whatever one wishes and reaps appropriate rewards for the actions. However, this sphere of influence is not unlimited. Beyond this sphere extends the area of God's decree or His own will. In this area, man has no free will to act. As a simple illustration, one is free to kill another human being. Although one may suffer appropriate consequences of such an action, nevertheless, one is free to carry it out and the action would fall within the sphere of human free will. However, if one decides to kill ALL human beings that live on this earth, the action may not be achievable since it may go contrary to God's own design and decree for the human race.

A poor understanding of the Islamic concept of God's Decree has led many non-Muslims to consider Muslims as fatalists. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Muslims try as hard as anyone else in the world to attain their desired objectives.

## ISLAMIC WORSHIPS

In addition to the beliefs, certain practices are deemed necessary in Islam for a follower to develop his or her relationship with God and also discharge one's duty towards mankind. Institutionalised practices, or worships, that are intended to forge a bond with God, include:

- A simple Declaration of adherence to Islamic faith,
- Saying of a ritual Prayer, five times a day,
- Keeping of Fasts during a designated month,
- Giving of Obligatory alms (*Zaka*), and
- Performing of the *Hajj* or Pilgrimage<sup>40</sup>

The above formal worships in Islam are clearly defined. They are neither light nor excessively arduous. There is considerable leniency in their discharge if one is ill, travelling, or otherwise incapable of performing them.

### Declaration of Faith

Every Muslim is required to declare, as an element of his or her faith, that:

“There is none worthy of worship except Allah *and* Muhammad is a Messenger of Allah.”

Much like the Hebrew *Shemah*, the two short phrases represent the gist of the entire teachings of Islam:

- There is only One God and He alone must be worshipped,
- Muhammad is only a Messenger of God and should not be worshipped. Furthermore, as a bona fide Messenger of God, he must be trusted to be conveying God's commandments and Will.

## **Ritual Prayers**

All Muslims are enjoined to pray five times a day. The total time taken by these prayers can be as little as one hour or considerably more depending upon the inclination of the performer. All praying is directed to God only. The contents of these ritual prayers were partly set by the Prophet Muhammad himself and are partly left to the performer to select from appropriate passages of the Quran. Personal beseeching in one's own language may also be included.

Frequency of praying in Islam is designed to remind the follower of the centrality of God in one's life. The Quran constantly exhorts this principle and the entire worship in Islam is formalised to focus one's attention on God at all times.

Apart from Daily ritual prayers, Muslims perform special prayers on many special occasions including two festive days during the year and a special noontime prayer every Friday.

## **Keeping of Fasts**

Like followers of other religions, fasting is enjoined upon the Muslims as well. These fasts are to be kept by all adult Muslims who are healthy and not travelling during the Islamic month of *Ramadhan*. The fasts last from daybreak to sundown each day and complete prohibition is maintained from all edible and drinkable foods, including water. The time is meant to be spent on extra prayers and meditation. One is expected to be more conscious during this period to live a righteous life. At the end of the fasting month, a day of festivities is celebrated, again beginning with a special congregational prayer.

## **Giving of Obligatory Alms (*Zaka*)**

While Muslims are exhorted to give generously in charity, a minimum contribution has been mandated within the Faith as obligatory alms. This is termed *Zaka* and depends on the income and wealth of the individual. The money is spent on charitable acts performed by the Muslim Community. Muslims are also exhorted to

give alms towards non-obligatory charity, which is not regulated and can be spent in any way the giver feels fit.

Charity, in the widest sense of the meaning, is a cornerstone of Islamic teachings. It is not limited to financial assistance but also includes looking after the sick, taking care of the needs of the neighbour and the wayfarer, providing love and support to the orphans, and other general acts of kindness that make every society function in a smooth manner.

### **Performing of the *Hajj* or Pilgrimage**

The Muslims are enjoined to perform a pilgrimage, at least once in their lifetime, to the *Ka'ba*—the cube-shaped shrine in Mecca. The ceremony—that is performed at a designated period during the Muslim calendar—is part of an old religious tradition dating back to the Prophet Abraham. The Muslims consider the *Ka'ba* as the oldest house of worship in the world and face towards it during their ritual prayers.

### **THE SCRIPTURES OF ISLAM**

The Scriptures of Islam is the Quran. The word is derived from the Arabic root, *qra*, which means to 'read' or 'recite'. The Quran is a collection of verbal revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad over a period of twenty-two years. The book consists of individual verses that are arranged by Chapters or *Suras*.

Early revelations received by the Prophet during his stay in Mecca were largely memorised by him and his close Companions. As the amount of revealed material increased, and some Companions were lost in defensive battles, a systematic writing of the Quran was undertaken during the Prophet's stay in Medina. A dozen or so scribes were entrusted with the task who wrote down the revelations on pieces of leather, bone or other writing material used in those days.

No chronological order is followed in the final arrangement of the Quran. A consideration given to topical arrangement, however, is quite evident. The Quran was compiled in a 'book' form during the reign of the third Caliph, Uthman bin Affan — some fifteen

years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Today, all printed copies of the Quran in the world are identical—indicating an unusual preservation of the original text despite many sects and denominations that exist among the Muslims.

Unlike other Scriptures of the world, the Quran consists solely of revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad without any comments, additions or deletions exercised by any other person. Its language is classical Arabic of the highest literary standard. Although it cannot be classified as poetry—not at least in the style of the classical Arabic version—its diction is melodic and poetic in form.

The Quran consists primarily of exhortations to the believers. These directives form the basis of the religious Law followed by the Muslims. In addition, the Quran contains accounts of earlier prophets and peoples as illustration; metaphoric descriptions of the spiritual world; and general words of wisdom to mankind.

After the Quran, the next thing that forms part of the sacred literature of Islam is the account of the Sayings and Actions of the Prophet Muhammad, as recorded by his Companions and later generations of Muslims. Commonly referred to as the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (or *Hadith* in Arabic), these accounts were put down in writing about 150 years after the death of the Prophet. Although never accorded the same status as the Quran, these Traditions help greatly in formalising the Islamic Law and in presenting the character of the Prophet as a role model for the Muslims.

The Islamic Law covers both the religious as well as the social spheres of human existence. It is neither very rigid nor overly lenient. It recognises the frailty of human nature and due expectations for its correction. The well-known British parliamentarian, Edmund Burke, acknowledges the merits of Islamic Law in his book, *Impeachment of Warren Hastings*, in the following words:

“The Mohammedan Law which is binding on all, from the crowned head to the meanest subject, is a law interwoven with a system of the wisest, the most learned and the most enlightened jurisprudence that ever existed in the world.”



Today, the Quran is translated into practically every important language of the world. In English alone, over thirty translations are available in the market. As well, there are many detailed commentaries of the Quran available to the reader.

## MAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

In Islamic theology, God is not an impersonal and distant Being. No intermediaries are therefore required when dealing with God. All prayers, beseeching and communication are directed to God Himself. In fact, the religion of Islam strongly encourages that we build a very personal relationship with God. This relationship begins with the perception that God is the Ultimate Reality in the universe. Then, progressing through associations that are more intimate and wherein God is perceived as a Companion and a Friend, it reaches that final point where God becomes one's Belovèd. In the words of a medieval Muslim mystic:

"No one worships God by any act more pleasing to Him than that of loving Him."

The development of a relationship of mutual love between man and God is a hallmark of the religion of Islam. In this context, it would not be wrong to say that the history of Islam is the history of the lovers of God. However, to achieve this ultimate stage of love of God, considerable striving is necessary on the part of the seeker. One has to cleanse one's self of all impurities to make one worthy of God's love. One has to remove all hatred for others and any love that one may carry for one's own self or for material objects. One has to polish the heart until all rust is removed and it shines like a mirror, reflecting the light of the Belovèd. And then one has to remember God every moment of one's breath. As Kabeer<sup>41</sup>, a sixteenth century mystical poet from India, remarked:

"The breath that does not repeat the name of God is a wasted breath."

Thus, a very persistent striving is necessary on this journey to God. It is of this constant effort that Rumi<sup>42</sup> refers to in his *Mathnavi*<sup>43</sup>:

"I'll cry to Thee, and cry to Thee, and cry to Thee,  
Until the milk of Thy kindness boils over."

Although constant striving by the seeker is an absolute must on this journey of love with the Belovèd, it cannot reach fruition without special assistance. It needs help from spiritual masters in our society, and grace from God Himself. Guidance is indispensable on this journey from the spiritual leaders who have already travelled this road. Again, as Rumi puts it:

“Whoever travels without a guide,  
Needs two hundred years for a two-day journey.”

Likewise, God’s grace is essential in this endeavour of the heart. Someone asked a saint, “If I love God, would God love me?” The saint replied, “If God loves you, then you would love God!” The same philosophy is expressed by Maghribi<sup>44</sup>, a fourteenth century Persian poet, who wrote:

“No one by himself finds the path to Him  
Whoever reaches His street, reaches with His Feet.”

Rumi also supports this philosophy when he writes in a couplet:

“Not a single lover could seek union  
If the Belovèd were not seeking it.”

True love of God, however, does not come cheaply. One has to kill one’s ego and show true compassion for one’s enemies. One has to bear all sorts of injury and affront from the world for the sake of God. One has to estrange one’s self from the pleasures and pleasantries of worldly life and focus on the fruits and rewards of one’s love with the Supreme Being. And then there is the pain and suffering of separation from one’s Belovèd that sits heavy on the lover’s heart. Yet, such pain and suffering that a lover endures for the sake of one’s love is more welcome than any other pleasure in life. As Rumi puts it very aptly in his *Mathnavi*:

“Sweeter than this poison, I saw no drink;  
Lovelier than this illness, I see no health.”

The love of God brings with it a multitude of fruits. These include peace and tranquillity of mind, radiance in one's character and demeanour, and an increased acceptance of one's supplications to God. True dreams increase in frequency and the Belovèd begins to speak more often. Intimations are given of future events and we obtain great insights into the strange workings of this universe. That door that was closed to the logician and the rationalist is flung wide open for a lovelorn heart. Those mysteries that had defied the philosophers for ages are suddenly unravelled like an open book to a heart that is filled with Divine love.

Although the love of God bears the most delicious of all fruits, the gain of such fruits was not the objective of our pursuit. True love is based neither on temptation nor on greed. Nor can true love be invoked out of fear. This is the philosophy expressed by Rabia Basri<sup>45</sup>, a woman saint of the eighth century, when she addressed God in the following words:

“Neither by Thy Heaven am I tempted, Lord,  
Nor of Thy Hell am I afraid;  
But if I worship Thee for Thine own sake,  
Then let me, Lord, of Thy Beauty partake.”

In the Islamic philosophy, we love God because we find that in the entire universe, He is the only One really worth loving. He is the Gem of all gems, the Treasure of all treasures, the Beauty of all beauties. All else pales in value when compared to Him. No bond with anyone shall survive, save a bond that is made with Him. No friendship with any mortal shall outlive death, save a friendship that is made with Him. He is the true object of friendship and love—the Immortal, the Eternal, the Ever Lasting.

It is at the peak of this relationship of love that the ever-present veil is finally lifted from the Face of the Belovèd. At that moment, one sees with the eye of one's soul, as much as it is possible for any mortal being to see. It is for this single glance of the Belovèd's Visage that the saints and mystics have stooped to dust, and ached and pined all their lives.

With this stage of love in our worship, gone is the dread of a Wrathful God. A new God emerges in a beautiful new light. The

ordinary fear of God is now replaced by the fear of displeasing and offending one's Belovèd. In a loving heart, this fear is much stronger than any terror that may otherwise be invoked.

Although the religion of Islam has indeed taken the love of God to great heights, it is by no means unique to it. It is the common thread that runs through all faiths. On the path of seeking God, all faiths have shown similar stages, with the ultimate stage being the love and adoration of the Supreme Being. Thus, the underlying purpose of worship unites all religions of the world into one common pursuit and one common objective.

In the faith of Islam, true worship and true following of God's commands is only possible if one loves God. The mightiest of heads eventually bows when charmed by the magic of love; and the hardest of hearts eventually melts when warmed by the fire of love. The potion of love is the only potion that allows us to bind our own heart with the Heart of God and thus, in the words of an Indian sage, "making two hearts into one".

A day shall surely come when this universe shall meet with its own death. All life shall be extinguished and all worlds shall disappear to the point of nothingness. Like the times before Time, nothing shall exist at all—except the Spirit of our Lord. However, somewhere in that sole existence will survive a memory of our love that we managed to forge with Him, thereby giving us immortality beyond our farthest dreams.

## **ESTABLISHING A PEACEFUL SOCIETY**

Islamic practices are enjoined to promote harmonious social relations and are based on the doing of good and on the shunning of evil. Thus, a follower is exhorted to refrain from violating the property, the life and the honour of other people; and to deal with others with kindness, fairness and equity. Many social contracts and situations are also institutionalised in Islam such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and breach of social norms.

The religion of Islam has a very broad code of ethics and social laws to regulate the conduct of its followers. These laws are based on reason and common sense and are in accordance with basic human nature. These laws are neither excessively restrictive nor

completely liberal. They seem to follow a middle course, conforming largely to the natural good sense of humanity. As well, internal codes within Islam offer flexibility in the interpretation of religious Law under varying social conditions.

The Islamic code of behaviour keeps reminding the follower that one does not enjoy a completely free rein in one's life. Islam sets out its moral codes in a clear and concise manner, and constantly exhorts the believer to follow them for spiritual progress and growth. All social injunctions in Islam are designed to foster peace and harmony within the society and to create an environment for achieving nearness to God.

Basically, Islam exhorts the followers to do good and admonishes them to shun evil. All good traits such as charity, chastity, honesty, hospitality, kindness, generosity, humility, patience, piety, truthfulness, and other virtues are encouraged while all evils including covetousness, cruelty, dishonesty, idolatry, injustice, pride, taunt, and general wrongdoing are prohibited. Almost every chapter of the Quran refers to right doing as a necessary accompaniment of faith. Even in the earliest revelations of the Prophet Muhammad, as much emphasis was laid on the service to humanity as on the worship of God.

From his earliest life, Prophet Muhammad was a staunch supporter of the cause of the weak and the oppressed. When, after his first revelation he trembled in fear from the responsibility that was about to be placed upon his shoulders, his wife consoled him with the words:

“God will never bring you to disgrace for you unite the ties of relationship, and bear the burden of the weak and the destitute, and honour the guest, and help the people in real distress.”

In the same way, when his opponents in Mecca repeatedly asked his guardian uncle to deliver the Prophet to them so that he could be put to death, his uncle, Abu Talib, replied:

“What! Shall I give over to you one who is the refuge of the orphans and the protector of the widows?”

These compassionate examples of the Prophet's character are only a reflection of his general message to the world. In the religion of Islam, acts of worship are inseparable from acts of kindness. If prayer to God can be considered the best of all acts of worship, then kindness unto people is undoubtedly the best way to serve humanity.

Service to mankind is rooted in two basic human emotions: compassion and brotherhood. Both are highly emphasised in the religion of Islam. Compassion is in fact a Divine attribute. Thus, to be compassionate unto God's creation is to emulate the very characteristic of God Who is the Most Compassionate and Merciful. The Prophet Muhammad used to say:

“Grant mercy to those on earth, and He Who is in Heaven shall grant mercy upon you.”

The concept of brotherhood is not only designed to unite all Muslims into a common clan, but also all humanity into a common family and all creation into a common class. The true concept of brotherhood transcends artificial boundaries of colour, creed and ethnic affiliation. These man-made criteria of relative superiority completely lose their meaning in the religion of Islam. In fact, the faith of Islam goes to great lengths to actually dissolve such elitist notions.

The unique concept of human fellowship presented by Islam is acknowledged by Robert Briffault (1876-1948) in his book, *Making of Humanity*, in the following words:

“The ideals of freedom for all human beings, of human brotherhood, of the equality of men before the law of democratic government, by consultation and universal suffrage, the ideals that inspired the French Revolution and the Declaration of Rights, that guided the framing of the American constitution and inflamed the struggle for independence in the Latin American countries, were not inventions of the West. They find their ultimate inspiration and source in the Holy Quran. They are the quintessence of what the intelligentsia of medieval Europe acquired from Islam over a period of centuries through the various societies that developed in Europe in the wake of the Crusades in imitation of the brotherhood associations of Islam.”

The Islamic philosophy of human fellowship is based on the premise that all men are equal in the Eyes of God. Islam, therefore, allows no discrimination on the basis of skin pigmentation, social rank or worldly possessions. In this context, Professor Noldeke writes:

“Whoever went to Islam, received the same rights and undertook the same duties as the highest and nearest. There are no reserved pews in a mosque. Islam has been more successful in mitigating colour prejudice than other universal creeds. The Muslim Negro Africans are not treated as untouchable by their Arab co-religionists, but the Christian Negroes are shunned like the plague by the European Christians.”

A similar viewpoint is affirmed by the British Orientalist, Professor H.A.R. Gibb, in his book, *Whither Islam*:

“The ethics of Islam, its conception of social and personal morality are infinitely higher, infinitely more perfect than the corresponding conception within the Western Civilization. Islam has banned human hatred and opened the way for human brotherhood and equality but the Western Civilization is still unable to look beyond narrow horizon of racial and national antagonism.

“Islam has never known classes and class warfare within its society; but the whole of European history since the time of Greece and Rome is full of class struggle and social hatred.”

If any distinction is at all accorded to a person in Islam, it is based on his or her level of piety and righteousness. As Professor Laura Vaglieri writes in her book, *An Interpretation of Islam*:

“Each Muslim was distinguished from other Muslim not by reason of birth or any other factor not connected with his personality, but only by fear of God, his good deeds, his moral and intellectual qualities.”

In like manner the British novelist and scholar, H.G. Wells, recognises the contribution of Islam in removing social prejudice and discrimination, in his *Outline of World History*:



“Islam created a society more free from widespread cruelty and social oppression than any society had ever been in the world before.”

It is truly surprising that many people, who are otherwise devoted to their worship of God, lack a sense of their relationship with fellow man. In reality, service to humanity is a much harder task to accomplish than long hours spent in the devotion of God. It is to this fact of human nature that the Quran refers to when it states:

“And We have shown man the two ways  
But he attempts not the uphill road;  
And what shall make you understand what the uphill road is?  
It is to free a slave,  
Or to feed in a day of hunger  
An orphan nearly related,  
Or the poor man lying in dust.” (Al-Quran, 90:11-17)

Similarly, the importance of righteous deeds, vis-à-vis worship, is clearly explained in another chapter of the Quran, in the following words:

“Don’t you see him who denies the religion,  
He who drives away the orphan  
And urges not the feeding of the poor?  
So, woe unto those who pray  
But are unmindful of their prayer;  
Who like to be seen while praying,  
Yet refrain from acts of kindness.” (Al-Quran, 107:2-8)

## **HARMONY WITH SECULAR KNOWLEDGE**

Islam is a faith that is unusually consistent with scientific knowledge of the universe. Not only does Islam align itself perfectly with science and empirical truth, it actually invites people to verify its precepts through reasoning and reflection. Islam asserts that there cannot be a discord between the Word and Action of God. Thus, the revealed truth or the Word of God, and Nature—the action of God—are completely consistent with each other.

If there is an apparent inconsistency between the Word of God and His actions as personified by Nature, then either our interpretation of his revealed truth is in error or our perception of the natural phenomenon needs to be verified. According to Islam, it is unthinkable that the same God would say one thing and actually do the opposite.

Many religions of the world ran into serious problems when they challenged scientific discoveries that were eventually proven correct. Thus, both Judaism and Christianity suffered serious setbacks when they challenged the heliocentric model of the solar system (with the sun in the centre), the age of the earth, the theory of organic evolution and the modern astronomic ideas about the creation of the universe. Islam on the other hand not only refrains from criticising modern discoveries but in fact supports them.

## **UNIVERSALITY OF ISLAMIC TEACHINGS**

Islam is truly an international religion. It is not a religion specific to an ethnic group or a linguistic community or a geographical area in the world. It is in fact meant to be followed by everyone in the world. Islam does not recognise either social rank, or barriers based on the colour of a person's skin. It truly promotes social harmony and oneness of mankind. It favours neither the rich over the poor, nor the white over the black.

The religion of Islam marks the continuing evolution of the religion of mankind—though more specifically of the Judaeo-Christian traditions of the Near East. To the Muslims, the religion of Islam is not something that appeared suddenly with the advent of the Prophet Muhammad some fourteen centuries ago. Islam is in fact the culmination and perfection of mankind's religious traditions that date back to the time of the Prophet Adam. Thus, in the opinion of the Muslims, all bona fide founders of major religions brought in some aspect of the religion of Islam.

Islam is the only religion that considers other faiths of the world as bona fide religions. Thus, a Muslim believes in the prophets and Scriptures of all other faiths. This element of universality is unique to Islam and is truly the hallmark of this religion.

Islam also incorporates the best of all earlier teachings. It is a strongly monotheistic religion along the lines of Judaism. It emphasises charity, humbleness, meekness and love for humanity, along the lines of Christianity. It portrays God through a number of attributes along the style of the Hindu Bhagvad Gita<sup>46</sup>. It delves on the concepts of good and evil that is the foundation of Zoroastrianism. It carries great wisdom along the style of Confucianism and Taoism. It is full of prophecies and revelatory accounts along the style of the Torah and the Gospels. It recognises the trials and suffering of man just as Buddhism does, although it proposes somewhat different solutions. Thus, Islam presents, in one place, a variety of fundamental truths known to Man through other creeds.

The philosophy of Islam is extremely rich in its scope, yet very simple in its basic premises. The social scientists have determined that as the society matures, it strives to reach beyond the mundane daily activities of providing food, and becomes curious about a Higher Reality in the universe. This urge to progress from the simple establishment of social law and order to the search of the Absolute in the universe is present in every religion of the world. Islam amply satisfies this natural human emotion and has a very well developed philosophy that relates to the purpose of our creation and the direction in which we are headed.

To an outsider, Islam often appears as too much of a regimen of physical and spiritual exercises. It expects one to pray at least five times a day. It requires its followers to keep daily fasts for a period of an entire month. It demands abstinence from alcoholic drinks, intoxicants and gambling. It restrains one from indulging in carnal pleasures. Even many modern Muslims balk at these constraints and injunctions. However, few truly appreciate the philosophy behind such exhortations. Much like the devotion required by an athlete competing for the Olympic Gold, Islam, too, expects its followers to reach for the ultimate prize. The ultimate prize in this case of course is God Himself. Just like excelling in any sport requires the following of a specific set of exercises, so is the case with the seeking of God in Islam.

Very simply stated, the injunctions of Islam are a “How-to-do manual” for seeking God. One’s success in this endeavour depends

on one's understanding of the 'manual' and the amount of effort that one puts in the process of 'seeking'. However, looking at the nature of mankind, various persons would follow these injunctions to varying degrees. Some would be quite content with being called Muslims only culturally. Others would attempt to practise the edicts without a very clear understanding of their ultimate objective. Some would know what the true objective is but would lack in perseverance and fortitude to continue the hard spiritual climb towards the top. Thus, only a small number shall truly try and only a handful may actually succeed in reaching the peak. Such is the case with all human endeavours!

## THE FOUNDER OF ISLAM

It was the beginning of March in the year 632 of the Christian Era. Surrounded by desert wilderness, the small town of Mecca was rife with unusual activity. People had come from all around the peninsula of Arabia to perform their annual pilgrimage to the ancient shrine of Ka'ba<sup>47</sup>.

Looked at in a cursory manner, the day probably did not seem particularly special. After all, the people had been celebrating this annual event for the past twenty-five centuries. Many trivial details of this fateful day, therefore, were never recorded by those in attendance. Yet, the memory of this unusual day became engraved on the hearts of the listeners for as long as they lived and the message was passed on to others who could not attend.

As part of the annual rites, a man dressed simply in the seamless white sheets of a pilgrim's garb sat on top of a camel and addressed the people in a voice seeped with emotion. By the length of the recorded address, one can estimate its duration to be only a few minutes. Yet, over the centuries that followed, this brief admonition and exhortation to the people has had a more profound affect on their lives and outlook than any other human utterance.

The person spoke from an elevated area known locally as the Mount of Mercy. The words chosen for this message summed up the entire teaching of his prophetic mission. Reverberating over the sandy wilderness, the words formulated the essence of mankind's purpose and earthly existence. His followers had always looked up to him for guidance and wisdom. Now, with extreme deference, they listened in silence as the person on the Mount began to speak:

“O people! Listen to my words, for I do not know if I shall be among you after this year. Remember, that you have to appear before your Lord Who will demand from you an account of all your actions.

“O people! You have rights over your wives and your wives have rights over you. Remember! You must always treat your wives with kindness. Woman is weak and cannot protect her own rights. When you married, God appointed you the trustees of those rights. You

brought your wives to your homes under the Law of God. Therefore, you must not insult the trust that God has placed in your hands.

“O people! Feed your slaves as you feed yourselves and clothe your slaves as you clothe yourselves. If they commit a fault that you are unable to forgive, then pass them on to someone else. They are part of God’s creation and are not to be treated harshly.

“O people! Listen to my words and remember that all Muslims are brothers one unto another. As you are one brotherhood, you will not take your brother’s belongings that he does not give to you of his own goodwill. As well, guard yourselves against committing injustice.

“O people! Take note that I trample under foot all un-Islamic customs and traditions. All blood feuds are wiped out. As God has made you one brotherhood, so be not divided. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab or a non-Arab over an Arab. Nor is a white one to be preferred to a dark one, or a dark one to a white one. This day, retaliation for all murders committed in the Days of Ignorance is cancelled and all sums of interest are remitted.

“O people! Worship your Lord, observe Prayer, observe the Fast during Ramadhan, pay the obligatory alms cheerfully, perform the Pilgrimage, and obey those in authority among you. God will admit you to His paradise.”

Then the man asked the people if they knew as to what month it was. The people replied that, yes, they knew that it was the Sacred Month during which the Pilgrimage is performed. The man then asked them if they knew as to what area it was. Again, the people replied in unison that they knew that it was the Sacred Ground. Then the man asked them if they knew as to what day it was. The people answered again that they knew that it was the day of Pilgrimage. The man then continued with his exhortation in the following words:

“As this month is sacred, and this area is sacred, and this day is sacred, so has God made the life and property of everyone sacred. It is therefore unlawful to attack the life or property of someone, as is the desecrating of this month, this area and this day. This exhortation is not only for today but until such time that you meet your Lord.”

Then the man atop the Mount concluded his brief address with these parting words:

“What I have said to you, you shall tell the others who are not present.”

In the history of Islam, this Sermon on the Mount is known as the Farewell Address delivered by the Prophet Muhammad during his last Pilgrimage to Mecca. Anyone familiar with the faith of Christianity would find this address reminiscent of similar admonition delivered by Jesus Christ from the Mount of Olives, nearly six centuries earlier. In fact, anyone familiar with the history of the world’s great religions would find a clear parallel in every word, every admonition, and every exhortation delivered on this day with the teachings of earlier prophets and messengers of God. Despite its extreme brevity, the address sums up the entire teachings of the newest faith of mankind—the religion of Islam.

Three months after delivering his farewell address, the Prophet Muhammad passed away from this world at the age of sixty-two. His prophetic mission, which was entrusted to him at the age of forty, had lasted slightly over twenty-two years. Yet, in such short period, he had founded the religion of Islam, completely revolutionised the outlook of his people and galvanised them to take his message to the rest of the world.

The status of Muhammad in Islam is that of a prophet and messenger of God—much along the style of prophets recognised in the Israelite tradition. His function was to show the correct way to God and help establish peaceful and harmonious communities in the world. Although he is greatly revered for his nobility and piety, the Prophet Muhammad is never worshipped by his followers.

### **Birth and early life**

Born in Arabia in the year 570 of the Christian Era, Muhammad grew up largely as an orphan child in the Meccan tribe of Quraysh. These were the times when both the Byzantine<sup>48</sup> and the Sassanid<sup>49</sup> Empires were at their peak and a constant conflict was waged between them. The Byzantine influence extended beyond south-eastern Europe, to the Near Eastern countries of Turkey, Syria, Egypt and Abyssinia that had all accepted the Christian faith. The Sassanid Empire to the east, with its capital near present-day

Baghdad, covered the territories of Iran, Iraq and southern Turkey. The official religion of the Sassanid Empire was Zoroastrianism.

The peninsula of Arabia was ruled by independent tribes who followed largely animistic beliefs. Some towns and cities, such as Medina, had significant Christian and Jewish populations. The people of Quraysh—the tribe of Muhammad—traced their ancestry to Abraham, through his son Ishmael. While majority of the Arabs were polytheists, Muhammad and several other individuals followed the essence of Abrahamic teachings that advocated belief in One God.

Having suffered the loss of his father, his mother and his grandfather at an early age, Muhammad was essentially looked after by his paternal uncle. Although he belonged to a Meccan family that was reasonably well to do, he never obtained any formal education and was unable to read or write. Despite this lack of reading and writing skills, Muhammad possessed a keen and enquiring mind and was well regarded in the Meccan society for his honesty, trustworthiness and intelligence. However, his most notable traits, that were apparent from an early age, were his love for peace and concern for the well being of others—particularly those that were poor, orphaned, weak or otherwise oppressed in society.

Muhammad's early youth was spent largely as a shepherd, looking after the goats and sheep that he and his family owned. The well-known British historian, William Muir (1819-1905), writes in his *Life of Mohammad*:

“Our authorities all agree in ascribing to the youth of Mohammad a modesty of deportment and purity of manners rare among the people of Mecca.”

While in his early twenties, his reputation for honesty and fair dealing attracted the attention of Khadija, a rich Meccan widow, who wanted him to lead a trading caravan to Syria. After his return from Damascus, the lady was greatly impressed by the extreme honesty with which Muhammad had conducted the business for her. She made a proposition for marriage that was accepted. There was considerable disparity in their ages at the time of their marriage: he being twenty-five years old while she was approaching forty.



## **Beginning of Muhammad's mission**

Few details have survived of Muhammad's daily routine after the marriage except for the fact that he became increasingly involved in meditation and prayers. At the age of forty, Muhammad had a spiritual experience that changed not only his own life but also the lives of his tribe, his countrymen, and a good portion of the rest of the world. While meditating one night in a cave that he often visited for this purpose, Muhammad had a spiritual experience. In this experience, he saw the Angel Gabriel who commanded him to read. Muhammad replied that he could not read. After the Angel's command and Muhammad's reply were repeated several times, the Angel in the vision spoke to Muhammad in the following words:

“Read—in the name of thy Lord Who created;  
Created man from a clot of blood.  
Read—for thy Lord is Most Beneficent,  
Who taught by the pen,  
Taught man what he knew not. (Al-Quran, 96:1-5)

This is the first verbal revelation that Muhammad is known to have received in his life. Over the next several months, he received more revelations that started to define the nature and extent of his prophetic mission to the people. The second revelation received by him reads as follows:

“O thou covered in a mantle,  
Arise and deliver thy warning;  
And thy Lord do thou magnify  
And thy garments do thou purify  
And all uncleanness do thou shun  
And give not to gain more  
And for thy Lord's cause, be patient. (Al-Quran, 74:2-8)

Soon after, Muhammad was given further commands to intensify his worship for a great responsibility was going to be placed on his shoulders:

“O thou wrapped in a mantle,  
Pray at night except for a small portion—  
Half of it or a little less, or a little more—  
And recite the Quran a goodly recital.  
Verily, We shall cast upon thee a mighty Word;  
And remember the name of thy Lord  
And devote thyself to Him very devoutly—  
The Lord of the East and the West—  
There is none worthy of worship except Him;  
So, take Him for thy Guardian. (Al-Quran, 73:2-10)

In compliance with the new exhortation, Muhammad began preaching to the people, first to his near relatives and tribesmen, and then to the public at large. However, except for a few isolated conversions, his message was largely ignored. The teachings about One God and equality of all human beings were notions that were too radical for the Arab society at the time. In fact, the message of Muhammad was very simple and straightforward:

“God is One... There is none worthy of worship except Him... He has no associates... He is the sole Creator and Nourisher of the universe... God is Unseen and Invisible and should not be portrayed by figures and statues... Muhammad is God’s messenger just like Abraham, Isaac, Moses and Jesus... All people are equal, in their rights and before God... Kindness needs to be shown unto the orphans, the widows, the poor, the wayfarers and the neighbours....”

### **Life in Mecca**

Despite the simplicity of the message, it was initially ignored and then strongly opposed by the leading members of the Quraysh—the most influential tribe in Mecca. These people saw in Islam a threat to their own social and political power and did their utmost to oppose this faith. Thus, the only persons who were initially attracted to this faith were the poor, the weak and the oppressed in society.

The gradual success of Muhammad’s preaching brought on increasing opposition by the Quraysh and a growing mistreatment of his followers. Although Muhammad himself was initially spared, his

followers suffered all kinds of atrocities including beatings, insults, abuses and even death. The Prophet himself was a perpetual target of ridicule and mockery in the streets of Mecca.

By the fifth year of the Prophet's mission, ill treatment of his followers reached an extreme degree. Consequently, he advised them to emigrate to the neighbouring kingdom of Abyssinia that was ruled by Negus, a Christian king, who was known for his justice and fairness. A little over a hundred people took advantage of this opportunity. When the king was approached by the Meccans to force the Muslims to return to their homeland, the king refused.

Gradually, the persistent preaching of the Prophet brought its rewards in the form of increasing number of converts to the new faith. Such conversions were particularly effective among the visitors from the town of Yathrib that lay some three hundred kilometres to the north. As Muhammad's mission became increasingly more successful, opposition by the Quraysh also intensified in like proportion. In the face of mounting hostility, Muhammad advised his followers to start migrating to Yathrib whose people appeared to be more favourably inclined towards Islam. As more and more of his followers and friends left Mecca, the local opposition turned increasingly against the prophet's own person. At one point, the Meccan leaders decided to kill Muhammad and thus do away with the problem altogether. However, before they could put their plan into action, Muhammad quietly left Mecca in the secrecy of the night, accompanied just by a close companion and a guide.

### **Migration to Medina**

After several days of hiding and travelling to the north, Muhammad finally sought refuge in the town of Yathrib. This migration of the prophet that took place some twelve years after the beginning of his mission, now marks the reference point for the Muslim calendar. With this migration the Meccan period of humiliation, persecution and restrictions finally came to an end and the years of success and religious freedom began. With the arrival of Muhammad, Yathrib came to be known as *Medina-tul-nabvi* or the

City of the Prophet. In the course of time, it was shortened to Al-Medina or The City.

Medina at the time was home to several different ethnic and religious communities. These included two polytheistic Arab tribes, three Jewish tribes, a small community of Christians, and a small though growing population of Muslims. Prophet Muhammad quickly perceived that a peaceful situation could only exist among the diverse population if it was based on goodwill and support of all segments of the society. The Prophet therefore formulated a charter for the citizens that is known in history as the Constitution of Medina. Under the terms of this agreement, all signing parties formed a common citizenship; all warfare and bloodshed was abolished; freedom to practise individual religions was recognised; and anyone seeking the protection of Medina was to be duly recognised as its citizen.

The continuing success of the Prophet's mission in Medina sat heavy on the hearts of his opponents back in Mecca. As well, they were upset at the failure of their plot to assassinate him. Over the next five years, the Meccans marched against the Muslims in Medina on three separate occasions. Throughout his stay in Mecca, the Prophet had steadfastly resisted taking up arms against his aggressors. Every time his followers would ask him to retaliate, his answer was that God had not given him the permission to fight.

Now in the face of the advancing Meccan forces, a lot more was at stake. The Meccans were serious and wanted to put a complete end to this emerging faith. Finally, the Prophet Muhammad received his permission from God to take up arms in self-defence against his aggressors. The first battle fought at Badr ended in considerable loss of pride and life for the Meccans although they were better armed and significantly outnumbered the Muslims. The second battle fought at Uhud resulted in a retreat by the Muslims, allowing the Meccans to celebrate a victory. Against the third invasion from Mecca, the Prophet refused to indulge in warfare and had a trench dug around the City to keep the enemy at bay. The novel strategy succeeded and the enemy had to return with hardly any loss of life on either side.

In the seventh year of the migration, the Prophet undertook a journey to Mecca to perform an Informal Pilgrimage. When he

arrived in the environs of Mecca in the company of one thousand five hundred Muslims, the Meccans refused them entry into the city. The Prophet sent his emissaries to the chiefs of Quraysh to discuss and negotiate the matter. Eventually, a peace accord was signed between the leaders of the Quraysh and the Prophet. Known in history as the Treaty of Hudaibiya, the agreement included the following clauses:

- All fighting between the two groups was abolished for a period of ten years
- People were free to join either group. However, any minors joining the Muslims will have to be returned to the Quraysh while any minor among the Muslims joining the Meccans will not be returned.
- The Muslims would not perform the pilgrimage this year but will return next year without arms

On the surface, the Treaty appeared biased in favour of the Quraysh and many of the Prophet's own close Companions thought so. However, the Treaty carried an all too important clause that banned all fighting for a period of ten years. The Prophet was more concerned about establishing peace and amity among the peoples than his desire to perform the pilgrimage that very year.

The period following the Treaty of Hudaibiya ushered in much desired peace for the Muslims in which to preach their faith. A noteworthy aspect of this preaching was the sending of letters and envoys by the Prophet to the kings and rulers of various countries surrounding Arabia.

The recipients of these invitations to Islam included Heraclius, the Emperor of the Byzantine Empire; Chosroes Pervez, the Emperor of the Sassanid Empire of Iran; Negus, the king of Abyssinia; Muqauqis, the ruler of Egypt; Mundhir Taimi, the chief of Bahrain; Al-Harith bin Abi Shimr, the Ghassanid prince of Damascus; and the King of Oman. The Prophet also wrote letters to many tribal chiefs in Arabia and neighbouring Yemen.

Except for Mundhir Taimi, the chief of Bahrain, none of the recipients immediately converted to Islam. Thus, on the surface, this unusual preaching method of the Prophet may have seemed a failure. In reality, however, it spread the message of Islam as wide as it could go considering the means of communication in those days. It also reflects the zeal of the Prophet Muhammad in the matter of preaching and the fact that he always considered his message to be of universal importance.

In the year 630 C.E., about two years after the signing of the Treaty of Hudaibiya, the Meccans breached its terms. One of the Arab tribes in alliance with the Meccans attacked and looted one of the Arab tribes in alliance with the Muslims. The Meccans refused to disassociate themselves from their allies who were responsible for the breach, nor would they sanction compensation to be paid to the injured party.

To put matters right, the Muslims marched against the city of Mecca. The Meccans were totally awed by the strength of the Muslims that now numbered some ten thousand. Hardly any blood was shed, as the Meccans decided to lay down their arms, and a general amnesty was extended to everyone. The Muslims had been tortured in this city and were eventually driven out of it. The residents of this city had perpetrated heinous acts against the Muslims and had not let them live in peace even after their emigration to Medina. They had persecuted them when they lived in Mecca and waged three battles against them even when they had left the city. However on this day, when the enemy lay vanquished and helpless at the mercy of the Muslims, a general pardon was declared and no revenge was sought.

When the leaders of the Quraysh appeared before the Prophet Muhammad, he asked them:

“What can you expect at my hands?”

“Mercy, O generous brother,” they replied.

“Be it so; you are free,” he exclaimed.

Many of the bitterest enemies of the Prophet could hardly believe their ears that such a general forgiveness was indeed granted under the circumstances.

The British Orientalist, Stanley Lane-Poole (1854-1931), writes about this incident in his book *The Speeches and the Table Talk of the Prophet Mohammad*:

“Through all the annals of conquests, there is no triumphant entry comparable to this one.”

## **Farewell Pilgrimage and death**

In the year 632 CE, the Prophet felt that his mission was nearing completion and, understanding that the end of his own life was approaching, he decided to make a farewell pilgrimage to Mecca. The details of his Farewell Sermon from the top of Mount of Mercy are already given at the beginning of this chapter.

Two months after returning from his pilgrimage, the Prophet fell ill. One day during this last illness, he addressed the people after having led the Prayer in the mosque:

“There is a slave among the slaves of God to whom God has offered the choice between this world and that which is with Him. And the slave has chosen that which is with God.”

When Abu Bakr, a close Companion of the Prophet, heard these words, he began to weep, for he understood that the Prophet was speaking of himself and the choice that he referred to was his own imminent death. The Prophet then continued:

“O people, the most beneficent of men unto me in companionship and generosity has been Abu Bakr. And if I were to select from all mankind an inseparable friend, he would be Abu Bakr. But real companionship and brotherhood is ours when God unites us all in His presence.”

On June 8, 632 CE—three months after the Farewell Pilgrimage—Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam passed away from this world. Nearing the actual moment of death, the very last words that repeatedly came to his lips were:

“Unto the Friend that is Most High ...  
Unto the Friend that is Most High....”

As his body lay for visitation by his followers, two of his closest and dearest Companions, Abu Bakr and Umar, entered the small chamber and prayed in the following words:



“Peace be upon thee, O Prophet of God, and mercy from the Lord and His blessing. We bear witness that the Prophet of God has delivered the Message revealed to him; has striven in the way of God until God gave his religion victory; has fulfilled his words; has drawn us to himself and has been kind and tender hearted towards the believers; and has sought no recompense for delivering the Faith to us, nor has he sold it for a price at any time.”

This is perhaps one of the most befitting and succinct eulogies ever delivered in history.

The English-born American historian and philosopher, John William Draper (1811-1882), pays the following tribute to the Prophet Muhammad in his *History of the Intellectual Development of Europe*:

“Four years after the death of Justinian, in 569 AD, was born at Mecca, in Arabia, the man who, of all men, has exercised the greatest influence on the human race.”

### **Character of the Prophet Muhammad**

The Prophet Muhammad came along the style of myriad earlier prophets, all dedicated to establishing faith in God and calling people unto Him. Like others before him, he sought help from God with patience and prayer. He persevered with great fortitude and resolve on the very difficult path of changing long established habits, customs and attitudes of the masses. The Scottish theologian, Rev. Marcus Dods (1834-1909), writes about the Prophet’s mission in the following words in his book, *Mohammad, Buddha and Christ*:

“He saw truth about God which his fellowmen did not see, and he had an irresistible inward impulse to publicise this truth. In respect of this latter qualification, Mohammad may stand in comparison with the most courageous of the heroic prophets of Israel.”

He was extremely gentle of heart and dealt with people with great kindness and compassion. When asked to curse someone, he replied: “I have not been sent to curse, but as mercy to mankind.” Even as a youth, he was noted for his honesty and trustworthiness.

The generally kind nature of the Prophet Muhammad is described as follows by the American novelist, James A. Michener (1907-1997), in his article, *Islam: The Misunderstood Religion*:

“Orphaned at birth, he was always particularly solicitous of the poor and the needy, the widow and the orphan, the slave and the downtrodden.”

The Prophet was extremely peace-loving by nature. In fact, the love of peace was so deep-rooted in his heart that whenever a choice presented itself to him between peace and conflict, he unhesitatingly chose the former. On many an occasion, this meant suffering humiliation and injury at the hands of his opponents.

Being naturally inclined towards meditation and prayer from an early age, the Prophet used to spend practically the entire night in worship. He was a living example of a true lover of God—remembering Him during his waking hours as well as in his sleep.

No other reformer in history found his people at such a depth of degradation as the Prophet Muhammad found the Arabs. And no other reformer raised his people to such moral and spiritual heights as the Prophet Muhammad did. The purpose of the Prophet’s mission was not to initiate new religious laws and beliefs but to perfect those that had already been given to mankind for ages. His mission was not to initiate belief in another tribal god but to reaffirm true devotion to the God that had already been introduced to humanity over the ages.

Despite being a leader of the Muslims, the Prophet shunned fanfare or special status for himself. Like others in his community, he often mended his own shoes and clothes. He lived a simple life without social pretension or ostentation. Festive eating, indulging in ornate clothing and amassing of wealth, were totally abhorrent to his nature. In fact, days went by when no food was cooked in his house. If anyone presented him with a gift of silver, gold or precious clothing, it would sit heavy on his heart until such time that it was given away to a deserving person. The English historian, Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), notes the simple living of the Prophet

Muhammad in his book, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He writes:

“The good sense of Muhammad, despised the pomp and royalty; the Apostle of God submitted to the menial offices of the family; he kindled the fire, swept the floor, milked the cows and mended with his own hands shoes and his woollen garments.... On solemn occasions, he feted his companions with hospitable plenty; but in domestic life, many weeks would elapse without fire being kindled in the hearth of the Prophet.”

The prophet introduced a system of accountability in society that applied to all—the poor as well as the rich; the weak as well as the strong. Social justice was one of the great concerns of the Prophet throughout his life.

Whichever way one looks at the life of the Prophet Muhammad, he appears to fulfil the two prime objectives of his mission: to establish the Unity of God and to join ties of relationship. At the conclusion of his mission, a good part of Arabia was rid of polytheistic and animistic beliefs and worship was once again restored unto One God. Likewise, his message and mission accomplished in binding the diverse tribes and clans of Arabia into one nation—the Community of Islam, and bred among them a strong sense of mutual brotherhood that was totally lacking before.

The British writer, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), sums up the Prophet’s character in the following words:

“Muhammad was a man of truth and fidelity, true in what he said, in what he spoke, in what he thought; he always meant something, a man rather taciturn in speech, silent when there was nothing to be said, but pertinent, wise, sincere when he did speak, always throwing light on the matter.”

The American historian, Washington Irving (1783-1859), presents another facet of the Prophet’s character in his book, *Mahomet and his Successors*, in the following words:

“In his private dealings he was just. He treated friends and strangers, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, with equity, and was

loved by the common people for the affability with which he received them, and listened to their complaints.”

The well-known English Orientalist, Reynold A. Nicholson (1868-1945), recognises the perseverance and fortitude of the Prophet Muhammad in his book, *A Literary History of the Arabs*. He writes:

“Possessed and inspired by the highest idea of which man is capable, fearlessly preaching the truth revealed to him, leading almost alone what long seemed to be forlorn hope against impregnable strong-hold of superstition, yet facing these tremendous odds with a calm resolution which yield nothing to ridicule or danger, but defied his enemies to do their worst, Muhammad in the early part of his career presents a spectacle of grandeur which cannot fail to win our sympathy and admiration.”

The French historian, Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869), pays the ultimate tribute to the genius of the Prophet Muhammad in his *Histoire de la Turqui*, when he writes:

“If greatness of purpose, smallness of means, and astounding results are the three criteria of human genius, who could dare to compare any great man of modern history with Muhammad? ... Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational dogmas, of a cult without images, the founder of twenty terrestrial empires and one spiritual empire, that is Muhammad. As regards all standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than he?”

Much is made by the Western writers of the various battles fought by the Prophet Muhammad in his life. These writers fail to note that these battles were fought either in self-defence or for the establishment of peace in the area. Fighting was so abhorrent to the Prophet's nature that he never considered it anything but a necessary evil. For this reason, he imposed all kinds of restrictions upon his soldiers. An example of his exhortation in this respect is given below:

“Do not use fraud or deception. Do not kill children. Do not oppress the peaceful inhabitants of the country. Spare weak women. Have pity on suckling infants and the sick. Do not destroy the houses; do not overrun the fields; do not devastate the orchards; and do not cut down the date-palm trees.”

Any fighting carried out by the Prophet was strictly in self-defence or for the purpose of establishing peace. Not once did he undertake an armed conflict for any other reason. While he achieved numerous military triumphs and conquests, they were not the objective, per se. Washington Irving confirms this fact when he writes in his book, *Mahomet and his Successors*:

“His military triumphs awakened no pride or vain glory, as they would have done had they been affected for selfish purposes. In the time of his greatest power, he maintained the same simplicity of manners and appearance as in the days of his adversity.”

The character, mission and status of Muhammad have been grossly misunderstood in the West. In this context, the British Orientalist, William Montgomery Watt (1909-2006) makes the following remark in his book, *Mohammad at Mecca*:

“To suppose Mohammad as impostor raises more problems than it solves. Moreover, none of the great figures of history is so poorly appreciated in the West as Mohammad.”

In view of the general misunderstanding about Islam and the zealous propaganda directed against this faith, the celebrated British dramatist and critic, George Bernard Shaw (1865-1950), defends the situation in the following words:

“The medieval Ecclesiastics, either through ignorance or bigotry, painted Muhammadanism in darkest colours. In fact, they were trained both to hate the man Muhammad and his religion. To them he was anti-Christ. I have studied him, the wonderful man, and in my view .... far from being an anti-Christ, he must be called the saviour of humanity.”

## Spread of Islam

Of all the religions of the world, the spread of Islam has been the fastest. Within a hundred years of its founding, Islam had spread from the Atlantic coast of North Africa in the west to the Indus River in the east. At the same time, it had penetrated beyond the Oxus River into Central Asia and was ready to make significant inroads into Spain and southern Europe. The American historian and political theorist, Lothrop Stoddard (1883-1950), writes of this rapid spread in his book, *The New World of Islam*:

“The rise of Islam is perhaps the most amazing event in human history. Springing from a land and a people previously negligible, Islam spread within a century over half the earth, shattering great empires, overthrowing long established religions, remoulding the souls of races, and building up a whole new world, the world of Islam.”

Most European scholars have attributed this unusual spread of Islam to the political conquests made during the first century after its founding. However, some Orientalists disagree with this broad generalisation. The British Orientalist, Sir Thomas Arnold<sup>50</sup> (1864-1930), observes that the actual conversions to this faith took place through the untiring efforts of the Muslim missionaries. According to this scholar, Muslim missionaries moulded their lives along the pattern of the Prophet's life and preached the religion of Islam to the world just as the Prophet used to preach himself.

It cannot be denied that the political influence of Islamic governments in many countries afforded a highly conducive atmosphere in which to preach this faith. But this is true of all religions in history. In this respect, the patronage given to Islam by the early Caliphates is no different than the patronage given to Hinduism under the Guptas, or to Zoroastrianism under the Sassanids, or to Christianity under the Byzantine Empire and then later on under the colonising powers of Europe.

Thus, every religion of the world has taken advantage of its political influence and, in this respect, Islam was perhaps no different. But the image of the sword-waving Arabs converting their conquered nations at the threat of life is totally baseless and incorrect. Unfortunately, this is the image that is imprinted upon the

minds of most people living in the West. The British Orientalist, De Lacy O'Leary (1872-1953), confirms this situation in his book, *Islam at the Crossroads*:

“History makes it clear, however, that the legend of fanatical Muslims sweeping through the world and forcing Islam at the point of sword upon conquered races is one of the most fantastically absurd myths that historians have ever repeated.”

It is in fact a testament to the religious tolerance of Islam that many non-Muslim communities actually flourished during its rule. This is the case of Jews living in the Holy Land, the Hindus living in India, and the Coptic and other Eastern Orthodox Churches in the Middle East and the Mediterranean countries.

Again, there can be no denying that some Muslim rulers committed excesses during their reigns. However, such behaviour is a reflection of the personal character of these individuals and not of the philosophy and ideology of Islam. The religion of Islam explicitly forbids the use of force in the matter of religion and does not sanction any conversion under duress.

Preaching in Islam was never an after-thought but an integral part of the duties of a Muslim to convey the Word of God to the rest of the world. Therefore, right from its very inception, Islam was preached to everyone—to the Arabs and the non-Arabs; and to the followers of Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and the polytheists.

At the conversion of Bilal and Suhayb Rumi, the Prophet called them the first fruits of Abyssinia and Greece—indicating a great foresight and vision.

Basically, the Prophet Muhammad did two things that established Islam as a missionary religion right from its beginning. First, he trained the Muslims as missionaries and sent them out to neighbouring tribes and territories. A number of Arabian tribes such as Banu Sa'd, Banu Juhaynah and Banu Ru'as, converted to Islam through the efforts of a single member who came to Medina, accepted the new faith, and then preached it to his people on return. Many a missionary sent out from Medina were killed on the way by hostile tribes. Nevertheless, the tradition of missionary activity

founded by the Prophet bore remarkable fruit over the coming generations.

The second important step taken by the Prophet at Medina was to send his envoys to kings, rulers and chiefs within Arabia and the surrounding kingdoms. Through the letters carried by these envoys, the Prophet invited the various rulers to accept Islam. The historians—both Muslim as well as European—have written a great deal about the wisdom and courage of the Prophet Muhammad in inviting heads of mighty empires towards God and Islam. Again, little came out of such preaching at the moment. However, this act of the Prophet Muhammad clearly established Islam as a universal religion.



## **MUSLIM CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY**

With the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate<sup>51</sup> in 750 CE, a period of Islamic civilisation commenced that lasted well into the fourteenth century. During this six hundred year period, the Muslims made significant contributions in the fields of science, philosophy, mathematics, medicine, architecture and the arts. The short summary that follows, addresses three important aspects of this subject:

- Mechanism by which Muslims acquired a vast degree of existing knowledge,
- Specific contributions that medieval Muslims made to the various fields of knowledge, and
- Reasons that led to the eventual decline of Muslim superiority in these fields

### **Acquisition of existing knowledge**

Expansion of the Muslim Empire in the first century of Islam brought them in direct contact with the Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews and Hindus. Although the Muslims possessed an advanced theology, they lacked expertise in the natural sciences, mathematics, medicine and philosophy. Their poor understanding of the science of logic often put the Muslims at a disadvantage in debates with other scholars. The concepts of syllogism, fallacies, and inductive and deductive logic were still foreign to the majority of Muslims.

Motivated by the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad to seek knowledge, the Muslims turned to the existing fields of philosophy, logic and science of medicine with unprecedented thirst. Until the rise of Islamic civilisation, bulk of the contributions made to the field of knowledge had come from the efforts of the Greeks. Thales and Democritus were known for their cosmic and atomic theories; Galen and Hippocrates for their expertise in medicine; Pythagoras, Euclid and Archimedes for their contributions in mathematics;

Ptolemy reigned as the great astronomer; and Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were truly the giants in the fields of philosophy, logic and social sciences.

With little pride and a great deal of genuine curiosity, the medieval Muslims devoured the thoughts and ideas of the early Greeks. In little over a century after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslims had translated every important work of science and philosophy from the original Greek into their own Arabic language.

In the olden days, the sciences were not as compartmentalised as we find them today. It was in fact very common in the early days for a person to be a scholar of such varied disciplines as philosophy, mathematics, physics, astronomy, chemistry, medicine and even music. In time, however, the Muslim scholars attempted to classify the various sciences and fields of human knowledge. But, by and large, they remained multi-disciplined, with each person contributing to many fields.

### **Contributions by Muslims**

Since the list of Muslim scientists and philosophers runs into the hundreds, only a brief selection of their contributions is described here in a chronological order.

The first Muslim scientist appearing on the scene was **Jabir ibn Hayyan** (721-815 CE) who is universally considered to be the father of Islamic alchemy—the branch of knowledge that eventually gave rise to the modern science of chemistry. He came from southern Arabia and was recognised as an alchemist at the court of the Abbasid Caliph, Haroon ar-Rasheed. The main contribution of Jabir consists in making extensive use of experimentation in his enquiry. He is credited with the making of a number of acids and alkalis and the purification of many metals. Over the period, as many as three thousand manuscripts have come to light bearing Jabir's name.

The ninth century of the Christian Era was dominated by three great Muslim scholars that included Al-Khwarismi, Al-Kindi and Ar-Razi.

**Al-Khwarismi** (780-847 CE)—known in the West as **Algorism**—was the first great Muslim mathematician who came from the region along the lower Oxus River. His greatest contribution was the development of the new science of algebra that was based on his famous book, *Hisab al-Jabr wal Muqablah*. Al-Khwarismi introduced the Indian decimal system to the Muslim world that contained the special symbol for zero. When this system was eventually passed on to the West, it came to be known as Arabic numerals. Al-Khwarismi is also credited with the preparation of maps and tables for the movement and location of stars and planets. He also made significant contributions in geography and revised the earlier charts and drawings made by the Greek Ptolemy.

The influence of Al-Khwarismi on Western mathematics is so great that in many European languages, the Latinised version of his name, **Algorism**, was synonymous with the study of mathematics. The Latinised version of his name has also given rise to the word “algorithm” that describes recurring computations such as performed by modern computers.

The second great personage of the ninth century was **Ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi** (801-870 CE) who is universally considered to be the first Muslim philosopher-scientist. He thoroughly studied the Greek philosophy and in turn introduced to the Muslim world such masters as Hippocrates, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid and Ptolemy. He can be considered as the founder of the Islamic peripatetic (Aristotelian) school of philosophy and was greatly respected during the medieval and Renaissance periods in Europe. Aside from philosophical works, Al-Kindi’s contributions covered such varied subjects as physics, mathematics, music, medicine and natural history. Al-Kindi is also known for differentiating between philosophy that relies on human reasoning and religion that relies on revelation.

The third major scientific figure of the ninth century was **Ibn Zakariya Ar-Razi** (850-925) who came from Iran and is known as the greatest clinical physician that Islam has produced. He has been often compared to the Greek Galen, and is considered second only to the great master of medicine, Ibn Sina himself. Ar-Razi has produced many works on medicine, drawing extensively from the

writings of Greek, Hindu and Islamic physicians. In his most famous book called “*Kitab al-hawi*”, he discusses symptoms, diagnoses, and treatments of many diseases based on actual case histories. Similarly, his writings on smallpox and measles enjoyed great popularity and respect in the West.

The tenth century produced such notable Muslim scientists as Al-Battani (858-929 CE), the astronomer; Al-Farabi (870-950 CE), the philosopher; Al-Masudi (890-956 CE), the geographer and historian; Al-Majusi (d. 994 CE), the physician; and Al-Zahrawi (936-1013 CE), the surgeon.

For the sake of brevity, only the contributions of **Al-Farabi** (870-950 CE) are mentioned here who was the most dominant personality during the tenth century. Known in the West as Alfarabius, Abu Nasr Al-Farabi came from Trans-Oxiana—the area beyond the Amu Darya or Oxus River. In the history of philosophy, Al-Farabi is considered to be the greatest commentator of Aristotelian philosophy and is widely known as the “Second Master”—the first being Aristotle himself.

Like many other great Muslim scholars, Al-Farabi was something of a genius. He was well known for his expertise in many languages, mastery in the field of logic, and writing of significant works on physics, mathematics, music and ethics. He also happened to be a practising mystic. Al-Farabi was the first Muslim scholar to classify the different sciences and determine their limits and foundations. The works of Al-Farabi eventually influenced many European thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Coming to the eleventh century of the Christian Era we see the Islamic sciences and philosophy reaching their true culmination. It was a period when some of the greatest minds in these fields lived as contemporaries.

The first person to appear on the scene during the eleventh century was **Ibn Haytham** (965-1039 CE). Born in Basra, Ibn Haytham is regarded as the greatest Muslim physicist of all times. His greatest contribution falls in the field of optics, where his works influenced the writings of Roger Bacon and John Kepler. Ibn

Haytham gave scientific explanations for the phenomena of refraction, reflection, binocular vision, rainbow, pinhole camera, and focusing with the lenses.

Ibn Haytham also made important contributions in the fields of motion, inertia, celestial movements, and statics. He explained atmospheric refraction and determined that twilight ends when the sun is exactly  $19^\circ$  below the horizon.

The second person to appear on the scene during the eleventh century was **Ibn Sina** (980-1037 CE) who is known in the West as Avicenna. Born in Bukhara, Hakeem Bu Ali Sina is undoubtedly the greatest scientist-philosopher of Islam. As a precocious child, Ibn Sina memorised the Holy Quran by the age of ten, read all the books in the local libraries by the age of eighteen, and began to write his own books by the age of twenty-one.

During his life, Ibn Sina became famous more for his knowledge of medicine than of science and philosophy. He spent most of his life in various cities of Iran, acting as physician to the Buwayhid rulers. His most famous work is the Canon of Medicine that was widely used as a text in Europe during the Renaissance. His encyclopaedic book, *Kitab al-Shifa* (the Book of Healing), expounds peripatetic philosophy in Islam and contains discourses on mathematics, natural sciences, logic and mineralogy.

Avicenna was the most notable and influential philosopher-scientist of the medieval period whose intellectual genius was as widely recognised in the West as within Islamic lands. He left his distinctive mark not only on philosophy and the approach to science, but also influenced such later Christian minds as Thomas Aquinas, Roger Bacon, Duns Scotus, and Albertus Magnus.

Avicenna's approach to scientific enquiry was so systematic and organised that he became the prime target of Al-Ghazzali's attack on philosophers some fifty years later.

The third great Muslim mind of the eleventh century was **Al-Biruni** (973-1048) who was born in what is today the land of Uzbekistan. He turned his enquiring mind to practically every field of science and philosophy. He travelled widely and in his *Book of*

*India*, he describes the Hindu cosmological theories, wisdom and customs.

Al-Biruni contributed extensively in the fields of celestial mapping, botany, pharmacology, geology, geodesy, physics, and mathematics. He is credited with the determination of specific gravity of many substances and the computation of the earth's radius and circumference. Al-Biruni even suggested the possibility of sun's centrality in the solar system with the earth rotating as well as revolving around it. However, he never took the concept to the stage of presenting it as a hypothesis.

According to many historians, Al-Biruni was as great a scientist as Ibn Sina. The only difference was that Al-Biruni had far less impact on the Western thought, as his works did not get translated into Latin to the same extent as Ibn Sina's.

The fourth notable figure to be born in the eleventh century was **Umar Khayam** (1048-1125 CE) who is known in the West more for his Persian poetry than for his contributions in mathematics and astronomy. Umar Khayam is credited with the designing of the "Jalali Calendar" that is considered to be more accurate than the Gregorian calendar currently in use in the world. He is also known for his many writings in the field of philosophy and his important contributions in algebra.

In the past century, Umar Khayam's fame has spread in the West due to his Persian *Rubayat* or quatrains that were beautifully translated into English by Edward Fitzgerald. Unfortunately, the Western readers have failed to appreciate his peculiar manner of expressing his mysticism and he has ended up being regarded more of a rebel within Islam than the devout Muslim that he really was.

The last and one of the greatest Muslim scholars to come out of the eleventh century was **Abu Hamid Al-Ghazzali** (1058-1111 CE). Initially following in the footsteps of the earlier Muslim philosophers, Al-Ghazzali had an apparent change of heart and turned to mysticism and theology. According to most scholars, he was the greatest Muslim theologian and jurist of all times. Much of his work is of religious nature with his most famous book being *Ihyao Uloomud-Din* or The Revival of the Religious Knowledge.

In his famous book *Tahafatul Filasafa*—meaning the Incoherence of the Philosophers—Al-Ghazzali severely criticised the attitude of earlier Muslim philosophers and scientists. In his view, the study of Nature was being undertaken in too systematic a manner that appeared to be designed with the sole objective of determining as to how Nature worked rather than revealing the Face of the Creator. At the same time, Al-Ghazzali did not like the spreading influence of Aristotelian philosophy in Islam that appeared to be devoid of any spirituality.

Al-Ghazzali was a great writer and a similarly gifted orator. The main brunt of his criticism fell on the likes of Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina with the result that almost overnight, the pursuit of science and philosophy became unfashionable among the Muslims.

The twelfth century of the Christian Era saw the appearance of Ibn Zuhr (1091-1162 CE) and Al-Idris (1099-1180 CE), the physicians; Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185 CE), the philosopher; and Ibn Rushd (1126-1198 CE), the scientist-philosopher.

**Ibn Rushd** (1126-1198) was clearly the greatest mind of the twelfth century in the fields of science and philosophy. He was born in Cordoba, Spain, and is known in the West by his Latinised name of Averroes. Ibn Rushd is considered to be the greatest and purest follower of Aristotelian philosophy among the Muslims. Aside from his commentaries of Aristotle, Ibn Rushd produced notable works on religious law, medicine, astronomy and physics.

He was the most extensively translated Muslim scholar into Latin and succeeded in influencing Western minds much more than any other Muslim philosopher or scientist. In fact, most of his works survive today through their translations into Latin and Hebrew while the original Arabic manuscripts have been totally lost.

After Al-Ghazzali's denunciation of the philosophers, Ibn Rushd is the only major Muslim philosopher who took his pen in their defence. As a rebuttal to Al-Ghazzali's *Tahafatul Filasafa* (*Incoherence of the Philosophers*), Ibn Rushd wrote his *Tahafatul Tahafa*, meaning the *Incoherence of the Incoherents*. However, the influence of Ibn Rushd's rebuttal turned out to be far less effective than the original attack upon the philosophers by Al-Ghazzali.

The thirteenth century of the Christian Era saw the appearance of only one outstanding Muslim scientist—Al-Tusi.

Born in Iran, **Nasiruddin Al-Tusi** (1201-1274) was very much a generalist like Ibn Sina and Al-Biruni before him. He produced significant works in many fields including astronomy, geography, mathematics, theology and ethics.

When Helagu Khan invaded Iran, Al-Tusi offered his services as an astrologer. He thus gained the confidence of the Mongol invader and saved from destruction many observatories, libraries and educational institutions. In fact, he managed to persuade Helagu Khan to actually establish the Marghala Observatory.

The Islamic civilisation lasted more than five centuries and was clearly driven by the pursuit of knowledge. During this period, the greatest focus lay on the advancement of medicine, mathematics, natural sciences and philosophy. Many centres of learning were established such as in Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Cordoba and Toledo. Muslim Spain played a particularly important role in establishing Islamic civilisation. The Princeton University scholar, P.K. Hitti (1886-1978), acknowledges this fact in his book *The History of the Arabs*, as follows:

“Moslem Spain wrote one of the brightest Chapters in the intellectual history of medieval Europe. Between the middle of the 8th and beginning of the 13th centuries, as we have noted before, the Arab speaking peoples were the main bearers of the torch of culture and civilization throughout the world.”

The English Catholic historian, Christopher Dawson (1889-1970), also emphasises the role of Muslim Spain in his book, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, in the following words:

“For this was the channel by which Greek and Arabic science reached the Western world, and from which the medieval culture of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries derived its knowledge of Aristotle. We have seen how during the Dark Ages, the Western Mediterranean had been separated from Christian Europe and had been the centre of a brilliant cultural development derived from the Islamic East ... Toledo for a time became equal to Paris and Bologna as a factor in medieval



culture. The scholars of Toledo not only translated into Latin the whole Aristotelian Corpus in Arabic form, they produced versions of the principal works of the great Muslim philosophers and men of science: Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Al-Battani, Avicenna, ibn Gebirol and Al-Ghazzali.”

### **The decline of Muslim sciences**

By the later half of the thirteenth century, a decline had begun in the Muslim contributions to these fields. There were two reasons for this decline.

In the first instance, the attacks of Mongols on Baghdad and the weakening of Muslim control in Spain started a decline of the political influence of the Muslims in the vast Empire. This political decline removed the state patronage that was so necessary for the development of sciences and philosophy.

The second fatal blow to the pursuit of science and philosophy came through the writings and pronouncements of Al-Ghazzali (1058-1111 CE). Although a great philosopher and scholar himself, his criticism of earlier philosophers and scientists made this field unattractive to future generations of Muslims.

Thus, the loss of patronage and the criticism of scientists and philosophers destroyed the spirit of independent enquiry among the Muslims. From the middle of the thirteenth century onward, Muslim science and philosophy went into a steady decline from which it never recovered.

### **Passing of the torch to the West**

As the Muslim interest and superiority in the sciences and philosophy declined, the torch of secular knowledge was passed on to the Europeans. In this context, the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, Sir Henry Blackwood (1770-1832), states in his speeches delivered in India:

“It is to Muslim science, to Muslim art, and to Muslim literature that Europe has been in great measure indebted for its extrication from the darkness of the Middle Ages.”

The same idea is expressed by celebrated British philosopher, Bertrand Russel (1872-1970), in his *History of Western Philosophy*:

“Our use of the phrase ‘the Dark Ages’ to cover the period from 699 to 1000 marks our undue concentration on Western Europe. From India to Spain, the brilliant civilization of Islam flourished. What was lost to Christendom at this time was not lost to civilization, but quite the contrary. To us it seems that Western civilization is civilization; but this is a narrow view.”

The famous British novelist, H.G. Wells (1866-1946), writes about this transfer of knowledge in his book, *The Outline of History*, in the following words:

“From a new angle with a fresh vigour it (the Arab mind) took up that systematic development of positive knowledge which the Greeks had begun and relinquished ... Through the Arabs it was, and not by the Latin route, that the modern world received that gift of light and power.”

The French historian and anthropologist, Robert Briffault (1876-1948), acknowledges Muslim contributions in his *Making of Humanity*, in the following words:

“It was under the influence of Arabian and Moorish revival of culture, and not in the 15th century, that the real renaissance took place. Spain, and not Italy, was the cradle of the rebirth of Europe.”

The writer then goes on to add:

“It is highly probable that but for the Arabs, modern European civilization would never have arisen at all. It is absolutely certain that but for them it would never have assumed that character which has enabled it to transcend all previous phases of evolution.”

### **Muslims pursue alternate fields**

Fortunately, however, all was not lost as far as the contribution of Islamic genius to the general field of knowledge was concerned. With the natural sciences and peripatetic philosophy in decline, the

thirst for knowledge among the Muslims found an alternate avenue and turned towards mysticism.

Over the next several centuries—until as recently as the modern times—Muslims produced some of the greatest religious scholars, reformers and mystics. Mysticism in Islam reached its true zenith largely during the period when emphasis on science and secular philosophies had been reduced. The list of mystics that emerged *after* Al-Ghazzali (1058-1111 CE) includes such well known names as: Abdul Qadir Jilani (1077-1166), Shihabuddin Suhrawardi (1154-1191), Fariduddin Attar (1125-1221), Ibn Al-Farid (1182-1235), Mueenuddin Chishti (1142-1236), Mohyuddin ibn Al-‘Arabi (1165-1240), Abul Hasan Ash-Shadhili (1196-1258), Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273), Sheikh Sa’di (1184-1292), Nizamuddin Auliya (1237-1325), Muhammad Naqshbandi (1317-1389), Abdul-Karim Al-Jilli (1365-1417), Shah Ni’matullah (d. 1631), Muhammad Nurbakhsh (1393-1465), Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1625), Shah Waliullah (1703-1762), and Seyed Ahmad Brelvi (1786-1831). This illustrious line of Muslim mystics and scholars reached its climax with the appearance of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908) of Qadian as not only the promised *Mujaddid* (Reformer) in Islam, but also as the promised *Mahdi* (the rightly guided one) and the Promised Messiah (representing the second coming of Jesus Christ).

Thus, during the long period of Islam’s political and secular decline, these mystics, scholars, reformers and spiritual leaders kept the lamp of knowledge burning within the Muslim communities.

In summary, the rise of Islamic learning owes a great deal to the great emphasis placed on knowledge in the Holy Quran and the Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. It was primarily the inspiration from these two sources that drove the medieval and later Muslims to seek knowledge from wherever they could find.

## MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT ISLAM

Today, Islam is not only one of the most misunderstood religions in the West, but it has endured a long history of systematic misrepresentation of its teachings and a persistent attack on the character of its founder. Perhaps no other faith in the history of mankind has suffered at the hands of such deliberate propaganda and inadvertent misconceptions as Islam has.

To a majority of people living in the West, Islam is perceived as a religion of pagans and infidels who practise polygamy, debauchery and slavery. In the Western mind, this religion is synonymous with holy wars, harsh punishments, and opposition to progress and scientific enquiry. Muslims are widely considered as fatalists, with men given to excessive pleasure seeking and women confined to seclusion. Some of the worst slander and defamation by the Western writers has been directed at the very character of the prophet of Islam.

The history of such prejudice against Islam is in fact very old. One of the earliest documented condemnations of Islam occurs in the works of the Syrian monk, St John of Damascus (d. 749 CE). In the writings of St John of Damascus, Islam is confused with pre-Islamic paganism and the idol of Aphrodite is associated with the Ka'ba. Not only does this early Christian writer call the founder of Islam a false prophet, but he was also the first person who began the long tradition of attacking the personal character of the Prophet Muhammad. St John of Damascus could be considered the founder of the Western attitude towards Islam that has persisted, more or less unchanged, for the past thirteen centuries.

A hundred years after St John of Damascus, the anti-Islamic banner was picked up by Nicetas of Byzantium, in the ninth century. Much of his Latin work called *Anatrope* is given to criticising the Quran, without even trying to understand as to what it really says. Distorting the Quranic arguments, Nicetas tried to prove that the God of Muhammad was in fact the devil.

In the land of Spain, two friends named Saint Eulogius (d. 859) and Alvarus (d. 861) undertook a deliberate and systematic

misrepresentation of Islam. Both writers painted a very ugly portrait of the Prophet of Islam, showing him as a falsifier of God's revelation, a shameless diviner, seized with sexual desire, and one who was eventually eaten up by dogs on his death. The venomous tone then turns towards the Muslim holy book and the writers describe the Quranic heaven not as a paradise but as a brothel.

In the eleventh century, a writing appeared in the Arabic language under the pseudonym of Abdal Masih that disparaged the character of the Prophet of Islam, showing him as sexually indulgent and a murderer. This writing has received widespread circulation in the West and was republished by the well-known British Orientalist, William Muir (1819-1905), as late as in the nineteenth century, for the use of Christian missionaries against Islam.

Misrepresentation of Islam and verbal abuse of the Prophet Muhammad reached their peak during the period of the crusades. These Christian holy wars were waged against the Arabs for nearly two centuries to win back the Holy Land from their rule. The events surrounding the crusades turned out to be very unfortunate for both religions and the seeds of mistrust and suspicion sowed in these conflicts lasted for many centuries.

Misconceptions about Islam continued to spread throughout the period of the European renaissance and well into the modern times. It is truly difficult to find a single Western writer who would refrain from taking an occasional pot shot at Islam or its founder. Even the writings of such apparently learned men as William Muir, Edward Gibbon, Max Muller, J.M. Rodwell and Thomas Carlyle, give away their deep-seated prejudice and bias against the religion of Islam.

Partly out of ignorance and partly out of prejudice, the West has never cared to even call the Muslims and their faith by their proper names. Until well into the twentieth century, the Western scholars have repeatedly referred to the religion of Islam as Muhammedenism and its followers as Muhammedans. Needless to say, such titles are extremely repugnant to the Muslims who, unlike the Christians, only worship God—and not the founder of their faith.

But centuries ago, the Muslims were not even called Muhammedans in the West. For a long time, the followers of Islam were simply referred to as heretics, pagans and infidels. In the early translations of the Holy Quran into the Latin language, the word

Muslim was never translated as one who “submits” himself to God. In one such translation carried out by a medieval theologian, Robert of Ketton (1110-1160), every possible circumlocution was used to avoid truly translating the word “Muslim” into Latin. Frequently, the word Saracen was substituted in the Latin translations wherever the word Muslim occurred in the Holy Quran.

The American novelist, James A. Michener (1907-1997), sums up the Western perception of Islam in his article, *Islam: The Misunderstood Religion*, in these words:

“Many Westerners, accustomed by their history books to believe that Muslims were barbarous infidels, find it difficult to comprehend how profoundly our intellectual life has been influenced by Muslim scholars in the fields of science, medicine, mathematics, geography and philosophy.”

Misunderstandings about Islam have arisen due to inaccurate and misleading accounts propagated over hundreds of years—some of them quite deliberately. Norman Daniel confirms this view in his book, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*:

“Faced with a choice between alternative stories, more or less favourable to Muhammad or to Islamic institutions, the medieval historians of Muhammad and critics of his religion acted on the assumption that whatever seemed least creditable, was most likely to be true.”

The celebrated British dramatist, George Bernard Shaw (1865-1950), is far more critical of the actions of Christian missionaries when he writes:

“The Christians and their missionaries have presented a horrible picture of Islam. Not only that, they also carried out an organized and planned propaganda against the personality of Prophet Mohammad and the religion he preached.”

G. Lindsay Johnson also confirms the prejudicial perception of Islam in Christian minds in his book, *Two Worlds*:

“The ignorance displayed by most Christians regarding the Muslim religion is appalling ... Mohammad alone, among the nations at that time, believed in one God to the exclusion of all others ... Most of the absurdities which Christians would have us believe to exist in the Quran were never uttered by Mohammad himself, nor are they to be found in a correct translation of the work.”

Although Western Orientalists have done much to introduce the subject of Islam to a population that, otherwise, would have remained totally ignorant of this religion, their motives have not always been purely scholarly or altruistic. The well known Swiss journalist Roger du Pasquier writes in his book, *Unveiling Islam*:

“One is forced also to concede that Oriental studies in the West have not always been inspired by the purest spirit of scholarly impartiality, and it is hard to deny that some Islamicists and Arabists have worked with the clear intention of belittling Islam and its adherents.

In recent times, the West’s prejudice against Islam has taken on a very ugly shape and this faith is being increasingly portrayed as synonymous with terrorism. Any criminal act by any Muslim anywhere in the world is automatically assumed to be driven by the Islamic teachings.

The world needs to understand that the faith of Islam neither preaches unjustified aggression nor pardons acts of terrorism. Nevertheless, every effort is being made today to portray Muslims as terrorists and to show Islam as a religion of violence and aggression. If there are indeed any acts of aggression by the Muslims, they are either politically motivated or purely criminal in nature. In both cases, they have little to do with the ideology of Islam. Yet, Islam continues to be portrayed by the media and the press in the ugliest manner that is conceivable.

The West appears to be threatened by the re-emergence of Islam. However, these apprehensions are based on the actions of a few political extremists, and not on true Islamic teachings that preach tolerance, peace and respect for human life. It is totally unfair to condemn the faith of Islam in the name of fundamentalism and terrorism, since Islam sanctions neither of them.

The West has shown prejudice and malice against Islam for far too long. The time has come for it to remove this veil of ignorance and begin to appreciate the beauties of this magnificent philosophy. No genuine and lasting peace is possible in the world unless the West recognises the contributions of the Muslims in the past and allows them to seek their legitimate aspirations in the future. The renaissance of Islam has already begun. But the future of the world belongs neither to the narrow minded *mullahs* of the East, nor to the highly educated technocrats of the West. The future is neither the birthright of the black nor of the white. The future of mankind belongs only to the honest seekers of truth.



## RENAISSANCE OF ISLAM

The momentum given to Islam by the Prophet Muhammad lasted several centuries. During this period, the Muslims expanded upon the philosophy of Islam, explored the deeper meanings of the Holy Quran, collected the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, and formulated Islamic jurisprudence. At the same time, they made notable contributions in the fields of science, mathematics, medicine and philosophy.

However, all religions weaken with time and Islam was no exception. Despite the appearance of numerous saints, reformers and mystics to renew the spirit of this faith, Islam went into a steady decline. Superstition and innovation crept into this religion and the light of spirituality was all but extinguished.

However, in the later part of the nineteenth century, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908) of Qadian, India, initiated a systematic revival and renewal of the religion of Islam. He attempted to remove all encrustation and superstition that had gathered over the past twelve centuries and presented this faith to the world in its pristine beauty. He breathed a new life into this religion and established its excellence among other creeds in the world.

Being extremely pious and righteous person, he was graced with abundance of true dreams, visions and converse with God. Thus, through his personal example and that of his Companions and followers, he demonstrated that the God of Islam is a Living God Who still speaks with His people as He used to speak in the past.

Through numerous writings, sermons and exhortations, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad affected a gradual but steady change in the religious outlook of his generation. He brought people closer to God and instilled among them a sense of moral rectitude and accountability before their Creator. He achieved all his objectives peacefully, entirely through the use of the pen and oral exhortations and sermons. He penned more than eighty books in Urdu, Arabic and Persian languages. Some of his books have been translated into various languages of the world including English as well.<sup>52</sup> In

modern times, he is the first person to claim that Jesus Christ did not die on the cross and that he travelled to Kashmir after surviving the failed attempt on his life.

In 1889, under a Divine scheme, he laid the foundation of a Movement to carry on his work. The objective of the Movement is to preach the religion of Islam to the entire world and to inculcate among its adherents the true spirit of this faith. The true face of Islam that Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad showed to the world is now embodied in the Ahmadiyya perspective in Islam.

The Ahmadiyya perspective in Islam is just that—a point of view or position within Islam—and not a separate faith. While all Muslim denominations and sects accept the coming of a Reformer or Messiah in the Latter Days, the Ahmadiyya perspective recognizes his coming in the person of Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, India. In practically all aspects, the Ahmadiyya perspective follows the traditional faith of Islam that was preached by the Prophet Muhammad, his Companions and the early followers.

Within the Ahmadiyya perspective in Islam, the return of Jesus son of Mary is interpreted to occur in a metaphoric rather than literal sense. Jesus Christ—like all other prophets before him—is believed to have passed away from this world. His prophesied return, therefore, only means that someone else with like attributes and traits shall appear in the latter days whose coming may then be likened to the return of Jesus son of Mary himself. This is the same principle that Jesus Christ invoked himself. When asked by his own people as to the promised return of Elijah, Jesus Christ referred to John the Baptist meaning that John the Baptist represented the metaphoric return of the promised Elijah.

Today, the Ahmadiyya perspective in Islam represents one of the most advanced and rational interpretations of the prophecies related to the Latter Days that are given in the Bible, the Quran, and the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. It emphasises the development of a close relationship with God, and peaceful and harmonious living among the peoples. It redirects our attention to the great wisdom buried in the Holy Quran and advocates the continuing applicability of Islamic principles to the modern age. It forbids the use of violence and urges the use of written, spoken or other media to spread its message. In a sense, the Ahmadiyya

perspective in Islam has ushered in a period of spring to this orchard after centuries of relative drought and autumnal weather.

The Ahmadiyya community today is perhaps the best example of the true Islamic society that can be observed anywhere in the world. It lives peacefully and is dedicated to the spreading of Islamic values and norms. After the passing away of Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in 1908, the Ahmadiyya Community re-established the system of communal governance along the style of the early Islamic Caliphate. The Community makes extensive financial sacrifices to build places of worship, schools, and hospitals and is actively engaged in other humanitarian activities. Considering the size of the Community, its efforts at preaching and publishing the Islamic literature through print and other media is truly remarkable.

Like most religious movements, the Ahmadiyya Community is extensively persecuted in many Muslim countries. Its social unity, its structure of governance, its grasp of true Islamic values, and its superiority in religious discussions and debates are the source of much envy and antagonism within the mainstream Muslim societies. However, despite these setbacks, the Ahmadiyya Community is on a steady path of growth and its current membership runs into millions.

## IS ISLAM FOR THE ENTIRE WORLD?

Peoples in the world are increasingly grouping themselves along lines of common language, culture and heritage. Social scientists believe that future conflicts in the world shall arise out of rivalries among these groups. This is the theme advocated by Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard University in his book, *The Clash of Civilisations*.

We know from history that splintering of mankind has caused mutual rivalries, notions of ethnic superiority and warfare in the name of religion. Thus, any grouping of peoples that can lead to future conflicts is not in the best interest of humanity.

To prevent any future clashes, the world needs to adopt a common ideology. Unfortunately, social scientists and philosophers have been unable to find a common ideological platform for this purpose. The choice for such a platform lies either in the major religions or the world or in the ideals of secularism—of which Western civilisation is the greatest proponent.

Many intellectuals in the West believe that the Age of Religion is gone and that the world should adopt the ideals of Western civilisation. Unfortunately, the Western civilisation—despite its great contribution to mankind—is largely devoid of spirituality and morality. It has always sacrificed universal justice in the interest of national objectives and tends to favour political correctness over moral imperatives.

Given this rather bleak scenario of our present times, a greater role of religion is necessary to redirect our priorities and bring a semblance of spirituality into our lives. Without proper direction, which is rooted in morality and not just in social pragmatics, our society may very well go the way of the mighty dinosaurs. We would be very naïve if we believed that scientific and technological advances shall insulate our society from ultimate decay. A look at the ruins of the Harappans in India; the Assyrians and the Babylonians in Mesopotamia; the Elamites in old Persia; the Pharaohs in ancient Egypt; the Hittites in Anatolia; the Medes in Iran; the Crete and Mycenaean in ancient Greece; the Olmec in

Mexico; the Norte Chico in Peru; and the Mayas in Central America should be sufficient to prove the point. A society that lacks moral fibre in its backbone is doomed to oblivion.

Many religions in the past were clearly meant for individual nations and peoples. This is certainly true of Judaism that was largely practised by the House of Israel, and of Hinduism whose practices and traditions are deeply tied to the land of India. Similarly, only the ethnic descendants of the earlier Sassanid people of Iran follow Zoroastrianism while Shinto traditions are not followed by anyone other than the people of Japan. The modern Sikh faith is also followed by a distinct ethnic community in India and is not preached to the outsiders.

In the history of world religions, only three faiths have carried out large-scale missionary activities. These include Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Any preaching by other faiths—such as by Hinduism in Indonesia and Judaism in the heydays of the Israelite Empire—has been limited in scope. Thus, only three of the worlds many religions could conceivably lay any claim to be of universal appeal.

As for Buddhism, it has undergone the greatest change over time. It has adapted to the local religious traditions of the different areas so well that its original teachings are now all but forgotten. In its present form, Buddhism lays little emphasis on the Person of God and has deteriorated to the level of a mere philosophy of life rather than a spiritual pursuit.

Christianity also lays the claim to be a universal religion of mankind since it emphasises meekness, humbleness, charity, forgiveness and compassion—human virtues that are essential for a common brotherhood of Man. However, Christian doctrines have undergone a systematic change from the Hebrew ways and traditions practised by Jesus Christ and his disciples, to the largely Pauline outlook that was adopted by the early Greek and Roman converts. These conflicts eventually led to the Councils of Nicea, Constantinople and Chaledon where the strong monotheism of the Old Testament finally gave in to the new concepts of Trinity, divinity of Jesus Christ, and worshipping of images. Furthermore, Christianity maintains a narrow view of the overall religious

traditions of mankind and has no adequate explanation for the existence of other religions in the world—particularly Islam.

In the presence of widespread disillusionment with many religions as well as with the Western civilisation, there is emptiness in the world calling for an intellectual breakthrough. To solve this dilemma of the modern society, Islam offers an ideological base that is spiritual, rational and sophisticated. With its principles of human rights, universal justice, and social equity, Islam presents a unique system to establish peace, prosperity and stability in the world.

Islam is the perfect religion today to give the much needed fibre of morality, purpose and philosophy to our modern society. It is the only faith in the world that can bring the entire humanity together into one fold. By removing any differences based on colour, creed or ethnic superiority, and by promoting the unity of God and the unity of mankind, Islam can bring lasting peace and spiritual awakening to the entire world.

Closely related to the principle of universal brotherhood, is the Islamic principle of universal heritage of mankind. Islam does not view different religions as alien to one another but considers them as part of a common heritage and history of mankind. Islam's perception of the diverse religions as a single entity is, in the author's opinion, the most important factor that can unite mankind under one umbrella.

Islam teaches humility, kindness, forgiveness and great compassion for fellow human beings. Although its image is much maligned by the media today, Islam's teachings can never be contrary to its own name that means Peace. Islam supports traditional family values and the establishment of a just and harmonious society. It believes in justice and equity and condemns notions of racism, ethnic superiority and social prerogatives. In Islam, all human beings are equal in the eyes of God and if some do excel others, it is because of their piety, righteousness and virtue.

Islam encourages contemplation, reflection and the pursuit of knowledge. It does not deny or confront modern scientific discoveries that are based on facts. Islam advocates complete conformity between the Word of God and His actions in the form of Nature. Over the centuries, Islam produced great scientists, philosophers and physicians whose works contributed significantly

to the meteoric rise of secular knowledge during the European renaissance.

Islam is a complete ideology for mankind that addresses its physical, social, and spiritual needs—in this world as well as in the next. A. Caspar beautifully states this comprehensive aspect of Islam in his book, *Religious Fundamental Themes for a Dialogistic Understanding*. He writes:

“Islam considers itself to be a universal religion in a threefold sense—a religion for all men, a religion for the entire man, and a religion for both lives.

“A total religion in the sense that it is universal, Islam intends to address to the entire man and to cover all aspects of his life, both individual and social.

“A universal and complete religion, Islam intends to ensure man’s happiness in this life and in the next.”

While every other religion tends to demand exclusivity of its revelation, Islam boldly suggests universality of this phenomenon. While other faiths tend to build walls around themselves based on ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities, Islam tries to bring the entire mankind into a single religious community by emphasising its common heritage. While other faiths elevate their saints and founders to the level of the Divine, Islam defers the matter of Divinity only to the Person of God—where it rightly belongs.

Not only does Islam accept the validity of other prophets and Scriptures, but it also extends the promise of salvation to the righteous followers of other faiths. This is truly remarkable for a religion and is unique to Islam. As it reads in the Quran:

“Surely, the believers, and the Jews and the Christians and the Sabians—whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does good deeds, shall have their reward with their Lord and no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.” (Al-Quran, 2:63)

“And who is better in faith  
Than he who submits himself entirely to God,

And he is a doer of good,  
And follows the religion of Abraham, the upright.” (Al-Quran, 4:126)

Thus, the very minimum requirement for salvation that is stated in the above verses includes belief in God and in the Hereafter, and the performing of righteous deeds.

Of all the religions of the world, Islam is the only one that has preserved its original teachings. The British Orientalist, Simon Ockley (1678-1720), observes this fact in his well-known book, *History of the Saracen Empire*, in the context of the Prophet Muhammad’s mission:

“It is not the propagation but the permanency of his religion that deserves our wonder; the same pure and perfect impression which he engraved at Mecca and Medina is preserved, after the revolution of twelve centuries ... The intellectual image of the Deity has never been degraded by any visible idol; the honours of the Prophet have never transgressed the measure of human virtue; and his living precepts have restrained the gratitude of his disciples within the bounds of reason and religion.”

History proves that no civilisation lasts forever. Great progress carries with it the seeds of complacency, arrogance and eventual decline. The Muslims, when they let go of the principles of Islam, suffered the same fate that befell the Hittites, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Israelites and the Byzantines.

However, an awakening is presently underway in many Islamic lands and the Muslims are seeking an identity in the world. However, processes of national awakening and enlightenment are generally slow and painful and would require many adjustments along the way.

With the fall of communism, the Western nations have begun to look at Islam as their greatest enemy. This idea is gaining increasing popularity in the academic circles and forms the basis of the foreign policy of many Western nations. According to Samuel Huntington of Harvard University, there are impassable obstacles between the West and Islam and the two civilisations will inevitably clash.



Unfortunately, such a perception is totally unjustified and may lead to unnecessary hostility between the two groups. Obviously, the West appears to be threatened by the re-emergence of Islam. However, West's apprehensions are based on the actions of a few political extremists, and not on the Islamic teachings that preach tolerance, peace and respect for human life.

In fact, the very ideals of the Western civilisation are rooted in Islam. In this context the British Orientalist, H.A.R. Gibb (1895-1971), makes an interesting comparison in his book, *Whither Islam*:

“The ethics of Islam, its conception of social and personal morality are infinitely higher, infinitely more perfect than corresponding conception within the Western Civilization. Islam has banned human hatred and opened the way for human brotherhood and equality but the Western Civilization is still unable to look beyond narrow horizon of racial and national antagonism.”

A similar view is expressed by the French historian Robert Briffault (1876-1948) in his book, *Making of Humanity*:

“The ideals of freedom of all human beings, of human brotherhood, of the equality of men before the law of democratic government,... were not inventions of the West. They find their ultimate inspiration and source in the Holy Quran. They are the quintessence of what the intelligentsia of medieval Europe acquired from Islam over a period of centuries.”

Although Western civilisation has contributed so much to the well-being and dignity of man, its rise has been largely based on the abandonment of its religious foundation. It is rather unfortunate that it has only risen after freeing itself of its Judaeo-Christian framework. The farther it rises, the farther it gets from its religious roots. This is both sad and unfortunate. Furthermore, the great freedom of operation given to immoral elements in society will continue to weaken the framework of Western civilisation.

Ironically, the only possible saviour of the ideals of Western civilisation is the religion of Islam! As the British poet, Basil Bunting (1900-1985)<sup>53</sup>, puts it very aptly:

“Sooner or later we must absorb Islam if our own culture is not to die of anaemia.”

A similar idea is expressed by Duncan Greenless in his *Gospel of Islam*:

“The nobility and broad tolerance of this creed, which accepts as God-inspired all the real religions of the world, will always be a glorious heritage for mankind. On it could be built a perfect world religion.”

This, truly, is the vision of Islam—to unite all humanity in a perfect world order. In Islamic prophecy, this unification of mankind was destined for the Latter Days. This unification was intended not only to bring the various sects of Muslims together, but also the followers of other creeds and faiths. Just as mankind was one community in the beginning, so can it be in the end. It is in this unification of mankind that our species has a chance to survive. It is in this merger of all faiths that peace and prosperity can be bequeathed to future generations.

## INVITATION TO ISLAM

This then is a brief overview of the religion of Islam. If the reader has read this far, he or she has successfully set aside the natural bias against this faith and has fulfilled one of the main objectives for which this book was actually prepared—the familiarisation with the basic tenets and philosophy of Islam. The author appreciates sharing some of these insights with the reader and hopes that reading these observations has been thought provoking.

Now comes the invitation to follow up with additional reading on the subject. Whatever else may come out of this follow-up, there is one thing that is certain: the reader will be a lot wiser for the undertaking.

This general invitation is extended to the followers of all faiths to come and partake of the beauty of Islam—the natural religion of mankind. Most of us have ingrained loyalties to our own heritage, traditions and religion and are afraid to explore an alien philosophy. In this respect, the reader need not worry. Earlier religious edicts were specific to a given period and people and were not meant for the whole world. Islam has not appeared in the world to erase earlier truths. It came to fulfil earlier teachings and to correct any undesirable innovation or deterioration that took place in religious principles. Islam has given a universal perspective to religion in general, removed social discriminations based on class and colour, and emphasised a balanced approach towards all social issues. Thus, embracing Islam only means taking a step forward in our constant march towards the ultimate truth and enlightenment.

This invitation is extended to the Hindus—the followers of one of the oldest religious traditions in the world. Any Hindu, who is familiar with the philosophy expressed in the Bhagvad Gita, will find that the God of Islam is exactly the same as the One preached by lord Krishna. The Hindu recognition of the various manifestations of One God only makes sense if taken metaphorically. If taken literally, they lead to obvious contradictions. Any Hindu who is familiar with the teachings of the

Rig Veda will easily recognise the face of Muhammad behind the hymns sung in praise of Rudra.

This invitation is also extended to the Buddhists of the world. Over the centuries, the original teachings of Gautama Buddha have perhaps undergone the most transformation compared to any other prophet's exhortations. One reason for this is the ready incorporation of local customs and traditions within the Buddhist framework as it spread out of India to various Far Eastern countries. At the same time, far too much mythology and superstition crept into the faith over the long period of its history. The Buddhists shall find in Islam a far more rational philosophy and a far superior channel to indulge in their natural mystical inclination.

This invitation is also meant for the Zoroastrians, who also follow one of the oldest religious traditions in the world. Zoroastrians should note that while people should be proud of their ethnic heritage, it should not become a hurdle in accepting truths that concern all humanity. We humans are much more than simply members of tribes, groups and nations. We are part of entire mankind. The wisdom and teachings expressed in the Zend-Avesta are truly great. However, the world has not stood still since the time of the Prophet Zoroaster. Many great Teachers have come since then and Zoroastrians should benefit from their teachings.

This invitation is particularly extended to the followers of Judaism. Of all the faiths in the world, Islam is perhaps nearest to Judaism in its essential precepts. Both believe very strongly in the unity of God, the power of prophecy, and the continuity of prophethood. The Jews must take a second look at their reasons for rejecting the claims of Jesus Christ as the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. Jesus was clearly a righteous person and but for some misinterpretations by later Christians about his status, he fits perfectly the traditional role of an Israelite prophet.

Probably the single most important reason why the Jews did not follow the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad is that he was not one of them. However, they should realise that he was indeed one of them—by his beliefs and actions. The Jews should note that we are all children of God and that God looks after all His creation. God has indeed favoured the Children of Israel in history and there is no denying this fact. However, God is Creator and Nourisher of all and

in this capacity He does shower blessings on the non-Israelites as well. Thus, the Jews should look beyond their specific tribe, clan and race, and take pride in the much more extensive and greater heritage—the heritage of the entire human race.

This invitation is also for the Christians who lay claim to following a monotheistic faith. However, if they ever investigated the early history of their faith, they would find that the early Christians, despite their tendency to make super-heroes out of their prophets, never transgressed the line that separated man from God. The Aramaic and Hebrew languages freely used metaphors, allegories and similes. Even Jesus himself often spoke in parables. To take his words literally—that he was indeed the Son of God—would be a great affront to such a noble and eloquent Teacher. The deification of Jesus Christ started in the second century and was officially adopted by the Church as a necessary article of faith in the fourth century. However, it was never part of Jesus' own teachings.

This invitation is also extended to the followers of Confucius and Lao-tzu, who are largely of Chinese origin. They should note that Islam readily accepts both of them—along with many other Chinese philosophers—as true prophets of God. But such Prophets, Messengers, Teachers and Reformers have also appeared in many other lands. To not avail of their teachings and wisdom is to deny oneself of the fruits and harvests that grow beyond the confines of one's own piece of land.

This invitation is also meant for the members of the Sikh community. These brave, modest and unpretentious people should note that the teachings given to them by Baba Guru Nanak are patterned entirely along the lines of Islam. Baba Guru Nanak was a true Muslim in every sense of the word. He wanted to instil within his Hindu agrarian community the Islamic principles of monotheism and human equality. While the Sikh denunciation of the Mughal king, Aurangzaib, may very well be justified in their eyes on political grounds, it should never extend to the faith of Islam that preaches religious freedom and respect for other people's beliefs.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this invitation is extended to those persons who are running away from religion altogether and are losing their belief in God. These include the professed atheists,

the agnostics and those who simply do not care much for religion. They should note that the religions of the world have provided the strongest stimuli towards the intellectual growth and social evolution of mankind. Although we constantly berate them and give them little credit, our religions are responsible for all our accumulated wealth of wisdom, the beauty of our languages, and the heights of our arts and sciences. The skills that we use today to unravel the great mysteries of the universe were in fact honed over thousands of years of philosophical and religious intellectualism.

While the Age of Reason has unravelled the mysteries of the universe and brought much comfort and ease to our lives, it has taken our spirituality away and has left us wandering—rudderless—in the ocean of uncertainties and doubts. Unwittingly, religion has become a victim of our collective process of growing up. In the past few centuries, we have learned a little too much, and a little too fast. In this hurried process of acquiring knowledge, anything that did not fit in neatly with reason and rationality was simply tossed aside as idle speculation.

However, pursuit of philosophy has greatly enriched our knowledge throughout the course of history. When this is added to the revealed truth, the combination offers us an avenue that takes us far beyond the physical universe—into the world of spirituality and the knowledge of God.

Nevertheless, with the rise of rationalism, all ideologies and beliefs based on mythology and unsupportable historical facts are falling to the ground. Religions that lack rational approach to their beliefs and practices are the greatest victim of this grand awakening of mankind. From now on, only those religions shall survive that are based on historically verifiable truth and common sense of their beliefs. Unfortunately, not many faiths today fit this requirement. In fact, there is only one faith that presents its essential beliefs and tenets in the most rational and logical manner and clearly exhorts its followers to develop a personal relationship with God. The author truly hopes that the reader decides to learn more about it.

May God reward the seeker's endeavours most handsomely.  
Amen.

## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Theory of Everything: in physics, that unites the weak nuclear, strong nuclear, and electromagnetic interactions of the elementary particles along with the gravitational force, into a single field theory. The Grand Unified Theory attempts to combine the interactions of weak nuclear, strong nuclear and electromagnetic forces into one single interaction. The inclusion of gravity with the other three interactions results in the Theory of Everything.

<sup>2</sup> David Edward Jenkins (b. 1925), British theologian best known as the Bishop of Durham.

<sup>3</sup> Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the French scientist, philosopher and mathematician who is credited with the development of the theory of probability.

<sup>4</sup> This passage is quoted from *The Essence of Islam*, published by the London Mosque, 1979

<sup>5</sup> *Nabi* (Arabic and Hebrew), from the root ‘*nba*’, meaning to call or to speak. A person through whom God speaks to the people (God’s spokesman).

<sup>6</sup> Avatar: literally meaning “descent”; usually considered a manifestation, embodiment or reincarnation, usually of God, into a material form. Some Hindus consider the prophets of other religions as avatars as well.

<sup>7</sup> Rishi; originally used for a Vedic poet who composed the Vedic hymns; in post-Vedic tradition, used for any sage, saint or wise man.

<sup>8</sup> Socrates (470-399 BC), a Greek philosopher whose theories of justice and virtue have survived through the writings of Plato. Socrates was tried and forced to drink the poison on the charge of “corrupting the minds of the Athenian youth”.

<sup>9</sup> Plato (427-347 BC), a Greek philosopher and a follower of Socrates. Most of Plato’s philosophical ideas are presented in the form of dialogues.

<sup>10</sup> Xenophon (430-355 BC), a Greek writer and soldier and a disciple of Socrates.

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<sup>11</sup> Rationalism: the theory in philosophy that the exercise of reason is the only valid method of reaching at the truth.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle (384-322 BC), a Greek philosopher who was a pupil of Plato and tutor of Alexander the Great. He had a profound influence on the Western philosophic thought.

<sup>13</sup> Empiricism: the view that experience, especially of the senses, is the only valid source of knowledge. In science, relying on observation and experimentation rather than on theory.

<sup>14</sup> Parmenides (b. 515 BC) was the founder of the Eleatic school of Greek philosophy.

<sup>15</sup> Zeno (335-263 BC) was a Greek philosopher who founded the Stoic school of philosophy.

<sup>16</sup> Vedas: any one of the four ancient religious texts of Hinduism in the Sanskrit language including Rig-Veda, Yajur-Veda, Sama-Veda, and Atharva-Veda.

<sup>17</sup> Torah: the entire body of religious law and learning of Judaism that includes the sacred literature as well as oral traditions. More specifically, Torah includes the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament known as the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). The authorship of the Torah is ascribed to Moses.

<sup>18</sup> Gospels: (meaning good news) any one of the four accounts given in the New Testament of the proclamation of redemption preached by Jesus Christ. The four canonical texts include that of: Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. The texts were compiled between 65 and 100 CE.

<sup>19</sup> Quran: verbal revelations vouchsafed to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of twenty-two years from 610 to 632 CE; the Holy Scriptures of the Muslims; from the Arabic root '*qra*', meaning to read or to recite.

<sup>20</sup> René Descartes (1596-1650), the French mathematician and philosopher who is considered the father of analytic geometry and who formulated the Cartesian system of co-ordinates.



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<sup>21</sup> Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), the Dutch philosopher and theologian whose controversial pantheistic philosophy equated God with the laws and forces of Nature.

<sup>22</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716), the German philosopher and mathematician who invented calculus independently of Newton.

<sup>23</sup> David Hume (1711-1776), the British philosopher and historian who argued that human knowledge arises only from sense experience.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Henry Thiry, baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), French philosopher who expressed materialistic and atheistic views. He is associated with the philosophical movement termed "French Materialism".

<sup>25</sup> Georg Hegel (1770-1831), the German philosopher who proposed that truth is reached by a continuing dialectic or system of arguments in which the conflict between contradictory ideas is resolved.

<sup>26</sup> Ludwig von Feuerbach (1804-1872), the German philosopher who in his major work, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), argues that religion and divinity are projections of human nature.

<sup>27</sup> Renaissance: the period from the 14th to the 16th centuries that marked the revival of classical art, architecture, literature, and scientific learning; originating in Italy, it spread throughout Europe.

<sup>28</sup> *Al-Kimiya*: a medieval chemical philosophy dealing with the transmutation of base metals into gold, the discovery of the panacea, and the preparation of the elixir of life. Investigations related to *Al-Kimiya* resulted in the development of the modern science of Chemistry.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Marx (1818-1883), the German philosopher, economist and revolutionary. With the help of Friedrich Engels he wrote the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867-1894) that had a profound effect on the rise of socialism and the spread of Communism in the world.

<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the German philosopher who argued that Christianity's emphasis on afterlife makes its followers less capable of coping with the earthly life. He proposed the concept of an ideal human being, the *Übermensch* (translated as Superman), who could channel passions creatively instead of suppressing them.

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<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the Austrian physician and psychoanalyst who proposed that much of the human psychological disorder could be traced to infantile psychosexual conflicts.

<sup>32</sup> H.L. Mencken (1880-1956), the American historian, journalist and unsuccessful novelist.

<sup>33</sup> E.M. Cioran (b. 1911), Rumanian-born French philosopher.

<sup>34</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), the American theologian who wrote essentially about morality and Christianity's refusal to confront social problems.

<sup>35</sup> Kurt Godel (1906-1978), a Moravian mathematical logician and mathematical philosopher. He worked extensively on the deducibility of truth, consistency of systems, and hierarchy of sets.

<sup>36</sup> Nicola Abbagnano (1901-1990), the Italian philosopher, as quoted in the Daily Telegraph, London, September 14, 1990.

<sup>37</sup> John Donne (1572-1631), the English metaphysical poet.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted from *Tabligh-e Risalat*, volume VI, p. 15 and as translated in *The Essence of Islam*, a 1979 publication of the London Mosque

<sup>39</sup> Quoted from *Lecture Lahore*, p. 9, as translated in *The Essence of Islam*, 1979, published by the London Mosque.

<sup>40</sup> Islamic Pilgrimage or "*Hajj*" is a ten-day event in which the Muslims carry out prescribed rituals at the *Ka'ba* or the holy shrine at Mecca.

<sup>41</sup> Kabeer (d. 1510), a mystical poet from India who combined Islamic Sufi ideas with Hindu imagery.

<sup>42</sup> Jalal-addin Rumi (1207-1273), one of the great mystics of Islam. He fled Iran because of his mystical and liberal views and found refuge in Turkey. The author of *Mathnavi*—a collection of mystical poems.

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<sup>43</sup> *Mathnavi* of Rumi is a six-volume poetic work of mystic love and spiritual teachings, in the Persian language.

<sup>44</sup> Muhammad Tabrizi Maghribi (d. 1406), a Persian Sufi poet who was influenced by ibn ‘Arabi’s idea of ‘Oneness of Being’, and then propagated it.

<sup>45</sup> Rabia Al-’Adawiyya (d. 801), also known as Rabia Basri, from Basra, famous for her devotional love of God and mystical poetry.

<sup>46</sup> Bhagvad Gita: meaning the “Song of the Lord”, in the Hindu epic tale of Mahabharata.

<sup>47</sup> *Ka’ba*, a cube-like shrine in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, reportedly built by the Prophets Abraham and his son Ishmael.

<sup>48</sup> Byzantine Empire: the eastern part of the Roman Empire, established around 330 CE, when Constantine-I made Byzantium its capital. Its extent varied greatly over the centuries, with its core being Asia Minor and the Balkan Peninsula. The empire collapsed when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 CE.

<sup>49</sup> Sassanid Empire: a Persian dynasty that ruled Iran from 224 to 651 CE, before the Arab conquest. The Sassanid era was marked by wars against the Romans, Armenians, and Huns. Zoroastrianism was the state religion of the Empire.

<sup>50</sup> T.W. Arnold, in “*The Preaching of Islam—A history of the propagation of the Muslim faith*”, published in 1896.

<sup>51</sup> Abbasid Caliphate was established in 750 CE and lasted until 1258 CE when the Mongols under Helagu Khan destroyed Baghdad.

<sup>52</sup> For books by Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian see [www.al-islam.org](http://www.al-islam.org)

<sup>53</sup> Basil Bunting (1900-1985), British poet.